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1. The first step is to identify the problem or question that needs to be answered. This involves understanding the context and the specific requirements of the task.

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*Short Cut to Tokyo*



# *Short Cut to Tokyo*

THE BATTLE FOR THE ALEUTIANS

BY  
COREY FORD

NEW YORK

*Charles Scribner's Sons*

1943

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COREY FORD

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*For*

JIM HUDELSON



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# *Short Cut to Tokyo*



## *1. The Invasion That Failed*

History can turn on a very small hinge. The history of Alaska, and perhaps the history of the American continent, swung last June on a little handful of land-based fighter-planes and bombers, appearing out of nowhere in the swirling Aleutian fog. . . .

For the Japs were planning more than the capture of Dutch Harbor, on that fateful third of June. There is little doubt now that their grandiose scheme envisioned an actual assault, by way of Alaska, on our Pacific northwest. The Japs wanted—and, make no mistake about it, they still want—to set foot on United States soil some day. It is more than a matter of military strategy; it is an emotional desire, a deep-seated and fanatic ambition that colors all their national thinking. And our apparently undefended Aleutians, which had served in pre-historic times as a land-bridge for invading hordes from Asia, offered once again a logical avenue of invasion for these modern barbarians striking at our shores.

It was to be part of a full-scale offensive in the Pacific. The Japs had devised a two-pronged attack: a sort of one-two punch, a left jab at the Aleutians and a right cross to Midway. The blow in the north would fall first on Dutch Harbor. The Japs knew—they had not been

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poaching in the Aleutians all these years for nothing—that our only shipping-route to Nome, to Bethel, to the whole west coast of Alaska, was through narrow Unimak Pass, between Unimak and Unalaska Islands. By taking Dutch Harbor, which dominated the pass, they could effectively bottle up half of Alaska. They could drive a thousand-mile wedge between the United States and Russia, thus cutting off any possible sea-lane for shipping supplies to Siberia, and at the same time protecting their own right flank from attack in the event of a Siberian offensive. Last but not least, they could operate against Midway and the Hawaiian Archipelago, as well as against the Gulf of Alaska to the east.

It looked easy: absurdly easy. They had been told that Dutch Harbor was our only fortified position in the whole thousand-mile Aleutian chain. The base was still partly under construction, garrisoned at the time by not more than a couple of regiments of ill-equipped and winter-weary troops and a few gallant Marines, defended by a meager battery of guns. After knocking this ripe plum from the tree, they were confident they could seize the Pribilofs to the north, attempt a mass landing on the Seward Peninsula and a penetration into the heart of Alaska. Or they could pick off Kodiak and then Sitka and Ketchikan; and from Alaska's southeastern tip it was only six hundred miles,

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as the bomber flies, to Bremerton Navy Yard and the great aircraft factories of Seattle and the northwest.

Everything went according to plan. Even the weather was in their favor: a characteristic Aleutian low blanketed the islands all that week, the ceiling was seldom more than two hundred feet off the water, a driving rain occasionally mixed with snow precluded the possibility of detection by air. Stealthily the Japanese invasion-fleet moved eastward along the deserted and storm-shrouded islands, part to the north and part to the south. The striking-force to the south—actually approaching in size the armada which attacked Pearl Harbor six months before—consisted of one large carrier, believed to be the *Ryujo*, one small carrier, possibly the *Hosho* or one of the *Hayataka* class, two cruisers and three destroyers. A full expeditionary force of destroyers and naval vessels, and at least four transports loaded with troops, followed in their wake north of the islands, ready to complete the occupation after Dutch Harbor had been paralyzed. No detail was overlooked. Under cover of the fog, a small landing-party crept ashore at Attu, westernmost island of the chain, silenced the radio-station before it could sound an alarm, and imprisoned the ninety Aleut natives and one white trader living in the village. Another small holding-force landed without opposition on barren Agattu Island, thirty miles from Attu; and then the lean bows

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of the invading armada sliced swiftly through the green rolling seas, bound for Dutch Harbor. . . .

We were not unprepared. For almost two months, prior to the outbreak of the war, the Navy's PBY's had been guarding the sea lanes of the Aleutians in full combat condition. On December 7, 1941, planes of two squadrons were actually at sea, patrolling with live bombs, when word was flashed to them of the Pearl Harbor attack. Due to the difficulties of beaching a seaplane in cold water and high winds, all Alaska patrols were conducted with seaplanes (PBY's) and amphibians (PBY-5A's): the sturdiness of these lumbering Cats, their ability to operate in overloaded condition, the reliability of their engines more than made up for their lack of speed in patrol-work. Despite their bulk—their landing gear alone weighs 2800 pounds—they were flown out of small fields with three to five thousand pound overloads. Engines remained in service for phenomenal periods prior to major overhaul. Daily patrol flights took anywhere from eight to fourteen hours; only occasionally did the pilots have as much as a day's rest between them.

It was a grim and cruel job, in the unending fog and sleet and wind that is the average Aleutian weather. Solid layers of overcast wrapped the islands in a perpetual mummy-shroud. Seas were so rough that destroyers shipped water down their stacks. There was the ever-



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present danger of vicious rip-tides, of uncharted rocks and peaks, of high winds that raced over the desolate landscape, unobstructed by trees or shrubs. Now and then a dreaded williwaw—Alaska's unpredictable hurricane which can attain a velocity of eighty knots—would pour down the steep sides of a volcano like a snowslide, obliterating everything in its path. A williwaw can reverse itself on a runway in the seconds it takes a pilot to set his wheels on the ground; it breaks up planes, tosses ships, upsets buildings, shatters nerves. Pilots setting out on a day's flight would bet their gasoline-supply against the weather. Lieut. (jg) Samuel Coleman, decorated for sinking a submarine, remarked frankly: "I didn't rate the DFC for the sub, but I sure won it a thousand times running our routine patrols."

Toward the end of May, the tension quickened: something was in the air. Headquarters of the Army bombing command and a squadron of medium bombers moved down the peninsula to Cold Bay; the following day half of this squadron moved on to Umnak and were replaced by another squadron from the mainland. Ships were loaded with torpedoes and crews remained in readiness. The forward echelon of the Eleventh Air Force was set up at Greely, leaving the rear echelon and administration units at Anchorage. Navy patrol-searches were made during the night hours as well—in Alaska there is approximately six hours'

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darkness in June—and often the planes conducted their entire flights on instruments, at times with the ceiling so low that the patrol was flown contact at fifty feet above the surface. On May 25th, a squadron of Army P-40's came into Dutch Harbor on their way to Umnak, flew within the rim of mountains surrounding the harbor, and circled at a low altitude while the pilots took a good look at the base.

On June 3rd, about dawn, another squadron of fighter-planes entered Dutch Harbor, flew again within the rim of mountains, and circled once more while the pilots inspected the base. The men on defense peered at them suspiciously through the thick gray fog. That previous day a patrol plane had reported indications of an unidentified surface force some four hundred miles south of Kiska, and late on the night of the second NAS Dutch had recorded unusual radio activity on a large scale somewhere to the south and east. Just before dawn a tender in the neighborhood of Dutch Harbor had flashed word of what it believed to be Jap planes passing overhead. As the unidentified squadron cruised low over the harbor, the fog parted for an instant. An alert Chief Petty Officer spotted the telltale Rising Sun painted on a wing, and opened fire.

The first attack on Dutch Harbor lasted about eight minutes. Evidently it was more in the nature of a reconnaissance flight, to size up our defenses before the

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invasion-force moved in for the main assault. Our batteries opened up with anti-aircraft fire, and combat and patrol-planes knocked down the Jap planes that bobbed up before them in the clouds. The Zeros bore down on one PBY, about to take off from the harbor, and strafed it temporarily out of commission. Another PBY, piloted by Lieutenant Mitchell, had just completed a gruelling patrol-trick in the Shumagins, with his plane in a bad state of disrepair, and was limping back to Dutch Harbor that morning when he was warned off. Before his crippled plane could take refuge in a nearby cove, it was sprayed with Zero bullets and set afire; the sole survivor of the crew was virtually cut to pieces by strafers when he took to a life-raft.

The first attack was over as suddenly as it had begun. Abruptly the circling planes withdrew, the echoes died against the resounding hills; both sides counted their losses. Altogether fourteen enemy fighters and four heavy bombers had been sighted over Dutch Harbor that morning, though perhaps forty Jap planes in all took part in the battle. Some were knocked down, others crashed in the water while attempting to regain their carriers in the murk. We lost two PBY's.

Hurriedly the rest of the squadron fanned out over the island chain, seeking the Japanese surface-ships. A Navy pilot, Lieutenant Cusick, had failed to return

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from his night patrol in the southern sector; it was assumed that he had been shot down by the carrier's combat patrol before he could get out his contact report. News of the attack was radioed to another PBY pilot, Lieut. L. D. Campbell, awaiting instructions in a hidden bay down the chain. With only 500 gallons of gasoline he took off in search of the carriers, went out to the limit of his supply—the point of no return—and on his way back, 80 miles off the shore of Umnak, sighted five enemy vessels: the first actual contact with the enemy surface force. So engrossed was his crew in their discovery that they didn't see the Jap Zero until it came at them from above. "It only lasted a minute," Lieutenant Campbell recalls. "We heard the roar of his guns as he zoomed down on us, then he was gone. But in that brief moment he'd given us everything he had. He put an incendiary in our tail 'tunnel' compartment, scored a cannon hit on the forward starboard wing strut, and sent twenty-seven caliber slugs racing up the tail section, painfully wounding the navigator-bombardier. There was a hole in our gas tank, though fortunately no fire. Last but not least, a lucky shot had severed one rudder cable, and we had no rudder control; the only way we could turn the ship was by banking her and skidding down in the direction we wanted to go."

Making a 90° turn with his ailerons alone, he was able to shake off the pursuing Zero in the thick soup.

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Several times the Zero, evidently directed by detection devices on the carrier, found him again; each time a quick 90° turn eluded it. At last his meager supply of gas gave out. In silence the crew heard the machinist's mate report "air through the flow-meters." Then both engines stopped, the starboard motor giving one last gasp which threw them into a bad skid. By superb piloting, Lieutenant Campbell made a successful landing on the ocean without rudder control—"just by luck," he said modestly, "the force of the wind righted us as we hit the water." The bullet-riddled plane began sinking fast. By stuffing the leaks with rags and life-jackets and even bits of absorbent cotton which the crew-members had been using to plug their ears, they managed to keep afloat until a Coast Guard cutter arrived to take off the crew.

Due to enemy vessels in the vicinity, the Coast Guard ship did not dare open up on its radio, and Campbell was unable to amplify the two meager contact reports he had managed to get out while under fire. Bursting with vital information concerning the size and position of the task-force he had sighted, he was carried protesting and fuming all the way to the Shumagins, where the cutter put in three days later.

As the Japs retired from their reconnaissance raid on June 3rd, all patrol-planes were hastily assembled for refueling and alteration of their armament from depth-

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charges to torpedoes—a laborious task since there was almost no torpedo-loading equipment at the three-weeks-old field, and the heavy tin fish had to be lifted by hand into wings twelve feet above the ground. From Campbell's garbled reports, the carriers were believed to be about 160 miles south and west; but all that afternoon and evening the weather grew steadily worse, and contact could not be made in the fog. Captain Meals led a flight of Army bombers from Glenn in a vain effort to attack the enemy concentration. The weather was so bad that an observer at Umnak, standing beside the strip, heard a plane landing at the end of the runway but could not tell what it was until the young pilot strolled toward him out of the mist and coolly inquired where he could find a cup of coffee.

The following morning of June 4th, Lieut. M. C. Freerks, returning from his overnight patrol in a PBY, picked up the Jap carrier group again, 210 miles southwest of Umnak. He maintained contact for about twenty minutes, dodging in and out of clouds until his gas ran low. Due to the force of the wind, he observed, they were operating no planes that morning. Acting on his information, an Army squadron of heavy bombers started from Kodiak; and Colonel Eareckson led another flight of B-26's from Glenn, armed with torpedoes, as soon as Navy patrol reports indicated that the carrier-force was within cruising range of the mediums. The

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second element of this flight split in two in the fog; Captain Thornborough and Captain Taylor, holding true course and speed, picked up the Jap task-force dead ahead. They were disposed abreast in line, they noted, one cruiser at the extreme left, next the large carrier, then the smaller carrier, then the other cruiser at the right; the three destroyers formed a screen ahead. As Captain Thornborough came in from the starboard bow of the formation, the unit did "ships right." Captain Thornborough was not satisfied with his run, pulled up into the low stratus, dove his plane and this time made a deck-level pass over the large carrier, dropping his torpedo. He saw five fighters parked tail forward at the bow of the flight deck; even while he watched, one fighter of the group was launched as the ship swung her stern through the wind. Captain Taylor's ship was damaged and his bombardier wounded on the first run, but he made two succeeding runs before he was satisfied and dropped his torpedo.

Captain Thornborough returned to his base, swearing vividly because his torpedo (used as a bomb) had not sunk the carrier outright. He refueled and armed with bombs, took off again in angry pursuit. He was never seen again. Once they heard his voice on the radio: "Over station, 9000 on top . . ." but that was all they ever heard. A month later they found the nose-wheel of his plane, and the body of his radioman still strapped to

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his chair, on the beach some hundred miles up the north side of the Peninsula.

Meantime Lieut. Com. Charles E. Perkins, then exec and now skipper, took off in a PBY with one torpedo and two bombs, to maintain the contact and make an attack if opportunity afforded. In manoeuvring around the Jap force, he ran out of cloud cover just above a cruiser, and the AA fire stopped one of his engines. He jettisoned his torpedo, bombs and some gasoline, and limped back on one engine. Lieutenant Stockstill, flying to relieve Perkins, was less fortunate; his slow PBY lacked sufficient cloud cover to get away from the fighter umbrella over the carrier, and he was shot down in flames. Thus the contact was interrupted for the vital period preceding the attack.

On the evening of June 4th, at five minutes of seven, the Japs launched their second and main attack on Dutch Harbor. It was a well-planned assault. First the fighters came from two directions, in five flights of three planes each, sweeping down on Dutch Harbor and Fort Mears and strafing the streets at five hundred feet. The defending shore batteries on Ballyhoo Mountain blasted them as they came over, destroyers in the harbor opened up with their anti-aircraft guns, a minesweeper and a Coast Guard cutter and an Army transport joined in with machine guns and rifles. One Jap plane traced a slanting streak of black smoke across the sky and dis-



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appeared behind Priest Rock. Another Jap fighter burst into flames directly overhead, and plummeted screaming into the water at the harbor's mouth.

Now the Jap level bombers—there were ten in all—appeared high above the base, dropping heavy explosives and incendiaries. One bomb raised an oil-tank more than a hundred feet in the air. Another started a fire near a warehouse; a gunner on one of the ships fixed the bomber precisely in the cross-hairs of his sight, and saw it trailing thick smoke as it dropped lower and lower over the hills. A Jap pilot spotted the old S.S. *North-western*, which had been hauled up onto the beach and anchored in solid cement to serve as living-quarters for the construction-crews; he dove on it eagerly, like a hawk on a barnyard chicken, and its venerable decks exploded in a single sheet of flame. Oily black smoke blended with the fog above the base, as the bombers circled for the kill.

And then the miracle happened. Out of the fog, striking suddenly at their rear, came a swarm of land-based Army fighters and medium bombers. The Japs wheeled, stunned. It was impossible: there were not supposed to be any fighter-planes for a thousand miles. Their intelligence had assured them there was no landing-field near Dutch Harbor. These planes were coming from behind them; that could only mean a secret runway, fortifications, an Army base somewhere to the

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westward. Honorable intelligence was cockeyed. Honorable intelligence had allowed their vulnerable carriers to walk into a trap. Two Jap observation planes flew through Umnak Pass between Umnak and Unalaska Islands; a couple of P-40's jumped them, the first Jap plane crashed, the second struggled away crippled. Our peashooters were all around them. They were surrounded; outflanked. So complete was their confusion that a group of eight enemy bombers and fighters flew, panicstricken, right over the hidden Army field itself. Our Warhawks shot down three dive-bombers, one Zero was destroyed by air action and another by ground-fire before they realized their mistake.

The enemy had had enough. Thirty or forty planes had been destroyed or lost in the fog; Army medium bombers under Captain Meals had made two torpedo hits on a cruiser, one exploding on the port bow and the other striking aft amidships, Captain Mansfield in a B-17 managed to drop a 1000-pound bomb squarely on an unidentified enemy vessel, before he was shot down, and Captain Marks dropped a 500-pound bomb on a carrier. Abruptly the entire invasion-force stampeded and ran so fast that many of their carrier-based planes were left circling in the fog. A radio-operator at Dutch Harbor, listening in at the time, claims he could hear the abandoned Jap pilots calling their flat-top in vain: "Whereabouts, prease, gas verree low, onry ten

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minutes gas,' they seemed to be saying. 'Whereabouts, prease, onry five minutes gas.' Then it was onry three minutes, and then I could almost hear them plumping into the water one by one as they hunted for that landing-deck that wasn't there. Plop, plop, plop. Fifteen, twenty; maybe more, I don't know. Good-bye, prease. So sorry. Plop."

All that night and the ensuing day, Army bombers and big Navy Cats with torpedoes drummed hour after hour through the murky skies in search of the fleeing Jap carriers. Contact would be made again and again, only to be lost in the enveloping fog before any appreciable force could be brought to bear. Jap ships, submarines and airplanes kept popping up with bewildering frequency all up and down the chain. Dogged Catalinas were attacked by faster, nimbler Zeros in the clouds. Bombers flew out into the mist and never came back. One PBY was disabled at sea, and the crew, manning a rubber crash-boat, were machine-gunned by a Zero while floating on the water. Often fliers returned to the base with their planes so tattered with holes they barely hung together; still the great Jap hunt continued through the ceaseless driving rain.

Piecing together the reports of Navy patrol squadrons, it is believed now that the larger carrier, during the night of June 3rd, retired to the westward with her task-force, proceeded through a western pass, and joined

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her sister-carrier north of the chain. Here an intensely thick finger-shaped fog-bank extended east and west; evidently the Jap carriers maintained their position in this narrow strip of cover during June 4th and operated their planes in the clear area immediately to the north and south. This tactic of operating in and out of the fog-banks is a favorite with the Japs, who understand our Aleutian weather all too well. After the unexpected appearance of land-based planes had upset the second attack, this carrier-group is believed to have retired through the Bering Sea in a northerly direction. Thereafter no further contact was made.

By June 8th, serious apprehension began to be felt for the security of Kiska and Attu, since no radioed weather-reports had been received from them since the attack. On June 10th, PBY's piloted by Lieutenant (jg) Bowers and Ensign Dahl were directed to scout the islands. They reported enemy ships in Kiska Harbor, and later, continuing to Attu, they found a tent-camp and numerous small boats and landing barges. The Jap expeditionary force, thwarted in its attempt to occupy Dutch Harbor, had settled instead in Kiska and Attu: settled there to all intents and purposes to stay. The second phase of the Battle of the Aleutians had begun.

Packing-cases and crates had been piled high on a Seattle wharf, three months before that Dutch Harbor

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attack. Men had worked rapidly in the raw March wind, loading them on ships bound for somewhere in the north; even the dock-workers were not sure where. Alaska, was all it said on the crates. Blair Packing Company, and Saxton and Company: couple of salmon-packing outfits, probably. Stuff weighed a ton to handle, they grumbled. It felt like lead.

It was lead. If a Jap had pried open one of those crates, he would have found lead-nosed bullets, machine guns, anti-aircraft cannon, all headed for our new Aleutian bases. But no Jap observed them: Major General Simon Bolivar Buckner, rugged ruddy-faced crafty boss of the Alaska Defense Command, had seen to that. The day after Pearl Harbor, he had interned the 200 Japs living in the Territory. Then he had besieged Washington for permission and funds to build two Army landing-fields near Dutch Harbor. Alaska was the nation's military stepchild, he argued. Our much-publicized Naval stronghold at Dutch had no protecting airfield for almost a thousand miles. If we knew this, so did the Japs. The Aleutians were certain to be the enemy's avenue of invasion someday, and we must be ready.

Tardy permission for the new fields was given; then General Buckner and his able self-effacing staff officer, Col. Lawrence V. Castner, worked out their strategy to keep construction plans secret. The Japs knew that we

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used the Aleutians for fishing, of course. Two mythical packing companies, Blair and Saxton, were founded on the spot. Blair Company stood for our site on Umnak Island, 60 miles west of Dutch Harbor; Saxton was Cold Bay, 120 miles east. All mail was addressed to these companies, all radio messages conformed; even in official correspondence the jobs were titled merely "Project A." Engineers under the supervision of Col. Benjamin B. Talley worked desperately, despite ice and high gales, to level strips in the barren hills. They installed a steel landing mat within two months.

They had no more time than that: the bases were still brand-new when the Japs struck—as General Buckner had predicted they would strike—at Dutch Harbor. But the appearance of land-based planes was enough, on that historic fourth of June, to turn back the enemy striking-force: turn them back so precipitously that the carriers themselves did not halt their flight till they were clear back in Japan. The frustrated troop-transports, their invasion plans rudely shattered, put in at undefended Kiska Island, 600 miles west of Dutch Harbor.

There is an interesting aftermath to the story, related by Captain Donald Nance of the Eleventh Air Force. Two days after Dutch Harbor, a squadron of seven Lightnings, en route from Cold Bay to Umnak, spotted a 3000-ton freighter. They circled it, as they do the many Lend-Lease ships plying these waters; and when

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it hoisted a Jap red ball flag, they pounced on it and strafed it with their 50-caliber guns. Immediately the ship hoisted a flock of signals, and our aviators pulled away. It was a Russian ship; fortunately there were no casualties. Evidently the Soviet captain could not understand the presence of American fighter-planes 800 miles from the nearest-known Army airfield. Or perhaps he knew of the Jap warships in the area, and he assumed they had taken over. . . .

Kiska Harbor, where the Jap expeditionary force took refuge, is the second largest in the Aleutians, capable of accommodating forty first-class ships; here the enemy dug in, and here our Army bombers and Navy patrol-ships bombed and strafed him mercilessly whenever the weather allowed. The first forty-eight hours following the discovery of the Japs on Kiska witnessed an unsurpassed exhibition of pure tenacity and courage. Every available plane was pressed into service, shuttling steadily all that day and night between Kiska and a base in the eastern Aleutians, reloading and refueling at a Navy tender stationed at an intermediary point. The men aboard the tender had never loaded bombs on a PBY before; nevertheless they worked around the clock without rest, the crews never leaving the small-boats. The pilots were unfamiliar with the bay where the tender was anchored; they landed in fog or in total darkness, many of them in the open sea, and taxied

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cautiously through the closely moored planes to the blacked-out tender. There they rearmed and refueled and, if they could still prop their eyes open, took off again.

Attacks by PBY's were even made by diving through the overcast at the unheard-of-speed—for a PBY—of 250 knots, dropping their bombs by the seaman's eye method, then making a four-handed pull-out back into the overcast. In the dense fog, the pilot had to time his bombing-run by clocking the position from Kiska Volcano, counting off the required number of seconds on a stop-watch, then pushing the nose down and hoping to come out somewhere in the harbor area. Dive-bombing a PBY was something the designer had never thought of. The heavy plane would go rumbling down through the clouds like a landslide, plunge into the clear over the Japs, the bombs would fall away, and both pilots would heave on the yoke together to pull their plummeting juggernaut out of its dive. The big boat would recover in the nick of time, its body creaking ominously, its long panels flapping like a seagull's wings as it made for the clouds again. The pilots themselves never knew how it hung together.

Apparently the Catalinas owed their survival to their sheer audacity. The Japs could not believe that these planes were PBY's. "The Americans are using a new type of dive-bomber against the Japanese in Alaska," a



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Tokyo broadcast stated that week. "This dive-bomber has a marked resemblance to the PBY." It is the firm belief of the PBY's squadron commander that the Japs, refusing to believe that the Americans would use their PBY's in this manner, mistakenly estimated their speed, aimed incorrectly, and thereby registered proportionately fewer hits. This is probably the reason their fighters did not press home their attacks more effectively.

By June 12th, the enemy forces in Kiska had been greatly increased, and their AA installations were augmented until it became extremely hazardous for any plane to enter the harbor under the overcast. The low-lying cloudbank that hovered over Kiska at 1000 feet contributed to the accuracy of Japanese anti-aircraft fire. The Japanese soon guessed our procedure of diving through occasional holes in the clouds, breaking out to bomb a target, and immediately seeking protection in the overcast again. By concentrating their light guns on these breaks in the clouds, and waiting with triggers cocked, they could subject the airplanes coming through to a withering fire. The first squadron of B-24's, flown up in rapid stages from a continental airfield when Dutch Harbor was attacked, attempted to come under the overcast at a low altitude. Almost the first anti-aircraft shell entered the bomb-bay of Captain Todd's lead-ship, and exploded there. The huge Liberator

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literally disintegrated in mid-air, with such force that the two wing planes on either side were seriously damaged and barely managed to limp home.

During this nightmarish campaign, our Army bombers and Navy patrol-planes worked together—like a boxer's fists coordinating with his eyes—to score hits on a large transport (a direct hit by an Army bomber piloted by Lieutenant Colonel Cone) a destroyer and three cruisers, and near misses on a destroyer, two cruisers and a transport. A total of approximately 65,000 tons of enemy warships and transports suffered under the onslaught. In addition, Japanese aircraft were destroyed, a radio station was demolished, ground installations and supply-dumps bombed. During these operations, one pilot logged 19½ hours out of a single 24; many fliers averaged 200 hours flying-time that busy June; reinforcements from the States were pressed into service so fast that one squadron proceeded directly to the attack without even removing their personal baggage after the long ferry flight. Over a hundred decorations were awarded the courageous Navy fliers who participated in this violent campaign. The Commander-in-Chief of the Pacific fleet radioed his personal congratulations to all hands: "I am confident that you will keep on accomplishing the impossible."

Occasionally submarines were spotted on these missions. Early in June a PBY piloted by Lieut. W. N. Thies

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saw a prowling sub surface directly beneath him. He dove after it, his bomb accidentally releasing itself as he went over. Since the bomb had been fused for impact with a solid object, the fact that it exploded upon dropping was evidence that it hit the submarine. However, Thies was so close that the blast from the bomb blew a large hole in his port wing, sent fragments through the fuel and oil lines, and set the port engine on fire. By sheer luck, the same flying fragments severed the carbon-dioxide fire extinguisher line at the fire-wall of the engine compartment; when this line opened, the fire automatically was put out. His engine dead, his plane badly damaged by the blast, Lieutenant Thies nursed the ship back 300 miles to its base at Dutch Harbor. Repair crews changed the engine, repaired the wing and tail surfaces of the ship, and it departed on another bombing-mission thirty-six hours later.

Fresh Japanese reinforcements were constantly arriving at Kiska under cover of the fog. On June 26th, Lieut. J. E. Litsey, piloting a PBY, observed what appeared to him to be a new heavy cruiser inside Kiska Harbor, ten miles away. As he approached from the west to photograph this cruiser, he was jumped by a single-engined, single-float biplane appearing suddenly over the hill. Thinking this was the usual type of Jap observation-plane, which had consistently refused to come within gun-range even of the PBY's, he had no

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thought of danger until it was almost on top of him. Then he discovered that it was a brand-new type of float-Zero, with a speed of at least 250 knots and four fixed guns. The Jap attacked savagely, and Litsey barely escaped into the overcast. On his return to Dutch Harbor, he found he had sixty bullet-holes in his plane, and his starboard engine was badly damaged. Thereafter all PBY's were released by the Task Force commander from further responsibility for reconnoitering Kiska Harbor, and attack-missions were assigned thereafter to the more suitable bombers of the Army Air Force.

Week after week the cloud-banks hung low over the water, the visibility was zero-zero; during the first three months after Dutch Harbor, there were only six days when we could do successful high-altitude bombing. Whenever the storm abated sufficiently, our long-range Fortresses and Liberators would essay the hazardous 1200-mile round-trip flight between Umnak and Kiska, struggling back to their base through fog and hurricane and icing-clouds, barely missing uncharted mountain-peaks that grazed their wings in the darkness, often arriving home with a mere teacupful of gas remaining in their tanks. Bombing missions without fighter-protection were perilous: the manoeuvrability of these Zeros on floats was amazing. Bomber-pilots reported that the Japs would deliberately perform a series of acrobatic stunts

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before they attacked. They would get above the clouds, do a whole flock of nip-ups, then make a general pass at the bomber and pull out as they fired. In one case, a float-plane made an inverted approach from ahead to shoot at an oncoming B-17. The bombers accounted for a good number of them—perhaps a hundred small planes were shot down in the total period—but the enemy was persistent. Within a couple of days another group would be assembled, diving and banking and half-rolling as the next mission came over.

For six long weeks the Jap fleet cowered in Kiska Harbor, evidently awaiting an avenging attack by our surface-vessels. None ever came. Our sole surface action occurred early in August, when a small unit crept westward under cover of total fog, halted ten miles offshore, sent one terrific broadside thundering through the fog, and then turned, like a small boy ringing a doorbell on Hallowe'en, and streaked back to the mainland. The following day a reconnaissance plane went over and discovered that, through some slight miscalculation on the part of the navigator, the shells had blasted a truly magnificent hole in the barren tundra, some five miles east of the Jap area. The episode is still referred to pleasantly as the Spring Plowing.

Encouraged by this evidence of hospitality, the Japs decided about this time to unpack their bags and stay. Towards the middle of August, our pilots began bringing

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back reports of sudden and furious activity on Kiska. Road construction was started; two seaplane hangars and ramps were built; huts and camp-buildings were hastily thrown up, sandbagged and revetted; a sub-base was constructed west of Salmon Lagoon. Telegraph-poles, brought all the way from Japan, lined the company streets. Now gun-emplacements were dug on North and South Heads, underground passages were channeled beneath the rocks, the anti-aircraft grew steadily more intense. With Oriental thoroughness, they even gave Kiska Island a new name: Narukima, which means Ringing of the Gods. What that means is anybody's guess.

But while the Japs were developing their own base, our own Army engineers were not idle. On an island in the Andreanoff Group, only a fighter-plane hop from Kiska, intelligence-scouts had secretly surveyed a site for a new landing-field. Now, as August drew to a close, one of the most remarkable armadas of the war set sail from the Alaska mainland, under the protecting cover of a Navy convoy and the ever-vigilant PBY's. There were lumbering transports, a few old freighters, a fishing-scow or two, several converted barges, a side-paddle river boat, even a little tug hauling a four-masted schooner loaded to the gunwales with gasoline. Every hold was crammed with guns, crates, construction gear; every inch of deck-space was jammed with men. Cur-

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tained by dense fog—and for once every one gave devout thanks for the foul weather—the strange flotilla headed westward. No Jap patrol-plane marred the murky skies, no prowling submarine spotted them from the sea, as the convoy crept at a snail's pace past the dangerous reefs and shoals that mark the shores of the Andreanoffs, breasted the mountainous tides, and anchored safely at last in the shelter of the island.

The rattle of chains in the hawse pipes had scarcely died away before our troops under full field equipment had clambered down the rope nets into the landing barges. Driving rain and icy seas soaked them to the skin; but at least the storm insured the landing-operations against air-attack. Quickly artillery protection was established. Jeeps, command cars, caterpillar tractors, trucks splashed towards the beach. The members of the ground-crews pitched in and carried on their backs the equipment for the base that was fast taking shape under the noisy activity of bulldozers and cats. For ten days they worked in sopping clothes, ate out of tin cans, snatched occasional hours of sleep in the mud and rain.

The expedition landed on Sunday, August 30th. On Friday, September 11th, the vanguard of a squadron of fighter-planes dropped out of the gray skies onto a finished runway. Two days later, the first B-24's landed beside them. Although the Japs did not know it at the

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time, the mission that paid them a blasting visit on September 14th took off from an island airfield that had been a wasteland of tundra and volcanic slag only fifteen days before. The Army Engineers had written a dramatic page in Aleutian history.

At last, with a base only a couple of hundred miles from the enemy, we were able to cut down the worst of our weather-losses, and for the first time to put a striking force of medium-bombers and fighters over Kiska. That initial visit was in the nature of a celebration. A squadron of bombers went over Kiska Harbor at fifty feet—believed to be the first deck-level mission ever conducted by U. S. bombers, setting a precedent which became the rule in that area thereafter—and destroyed three large transports. Pursuit planes swarmed over the target like small boys raiding an apple-orchard, shot up everything on the water and shot down everything in the air. At least five Zeros were accounted for that afternoon; our only casualty occurred when two P-38's, in their eagerness, collided on the tail of the same Zero. Highlight of the day was when a fighter-pilot, straying from the rest, stumbled on a lone Jap with his pants down, far out on the tundra, and gave delighted chase as the squealing Nip scrambled over the hummocks with his trousers dangling around his ankles. The pilot was the envy of his entire squadron later.



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The Japs never returned our visits in force. Once or twice a lone plane came over with a couple of bombs and dropped them in the vicinity of our base, usually about three or four in the morning. "He'd come around when the moon was full," one of the pilots recalled wistfully, "and we'd stand around and watch him. We all called him Good Time Charlie. Radio Tokyo claimed that he blasted our base out of the Pacific, but actually he did no damage. A couple of weeks after his final raid, we found the wreckage of his plane on the beach. We sort of missed him. . . ."

And now the long months of aerial slugging began. From their new base, all that fall and winter and spring, our pilots bombed and strafed the enemy whenever the weather allowed. Day after day, amid the foulest flying-conditions anywhere in the world, the Navy patrol-planes would scout the lonely seas; and now and then, when the skies opened up for a few precious hours, the Army bombers and fighters would take off to drop another lethal load on the Jap's well-bastioned fortress. They knew it was a hopeless task; they knew that intermimttent bombing-raids—regular missions were impossible to schedule in the incredible Aleutian fog—would never permanently dislodge a well-entrenched enemy so near his own base of supplies. "Let's drop another bomb in the harbor," they would shrug as they set out on a mission, "maybe the Japs are running out

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of fish." They knew the staggering toll the weather was exacting in equipment and men. They wondered sometimes, as they fought their way homeward through snow-squalls and ice and hundred-mile gales, when their own efforts would be coordinated with an all-out land and sea attack. They wondered how many more planes must be lost, how many pilots must die, before our Navy and our ground-forces joined in to finish the job. . . .

The story is not over. Slowly but surely, as this is being written, the tempo of events is increasing in the islands; slowly we are readying ourselves for the final offensive that will drive the invaders from our shores. The Aleutians are in the headlines today; they will be in the headlines tomorrow, and for a long time to come. Even after the last persistent Jap has been pried off our westernmost rock, these fog-shrouded islands will play a strategic rôle in the course of the war. "There are many roads which lead right to Tokyo," President Roosevelt said, "and we shall neglect none of them." Perhaps, when the time comes to strike at the heart of Japan, this ancient landbridge once more may prove a vital link between the Old World and the New. Perhaps a future road of invasion will lead westward across the snow-capped Aleutian peaks; perhaps the pilots who fly these sullen skies today are blazing tomorrow's short-cut to Tokyo.

## 2. *Our Unknown Front*

There are no trees in the Aleutians. For a thousand miles, west of Dutch Harbor, there isn't a solitary bush or shrub higher than your knee. No, that's not quite true; there's one tree, on Umnak Island. A couple of Army pilots flew it all the way from the Alaska mainland, and today it is growing inside a wooden stockade with a sign "Umnak National Forest." The men pause in front of it now and then, and stare at it in silence. It's funny how you get to long for the sight of a real tree, after a while.

Nothing seems quite real, as a matter of fact, in this far-off and fabulous archipelago stretching west of Alaska, west across the top of the Pacific almost to Japan: west of tomorrow. It is a region as remote as Mars, and almost as uninhabitable. Active volcanoes smoke ceaselessly against the sky; soot-smearred glaciers hug their craters; prehistoric mummies, with carved ivory labrets thrust through their withered cheeks, lie buried in warm caves at their bases. Along the sandy beaches, purple with volcanic ash, seals and sea-lions snort and plunge in the pounding surf. The wind howls day and night with a steady banshee wail, driving the scudding rain before it, and week after week,

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month after month, the sky sits solidly on the ocean. The bare treeless hills are as unreal as the other side of the moon.

But cold is real, and wet feet are real, and mud is real: your boot-soles cake three inches thick with it, your sodden parka steams damply in the heat of a quonset-hut. Going without fresh meat or milk or eggs or fruit is real. Not getting any mail from home is real; there hadn't been a mail-boat for two months when I was there. No shower-baths, no entertainment, no town to go to at night, no women for a thousand miles, is real. The waiting is real: that's the realest thing of all here. Waiting for the weather. Waiting for a chance to run another bombing-mission over the enemy target. Waiting for your wings to ice up, or a sudden snow-squall to sock in the field before you can return, or your plane to crash against an uncharted mountainside in the fog. Every pilot who flies in the islands carries an undated death-warrant: sooner or later he knows the weather will get him, sooner or later he won't get back. Waiting for that, day after day, is very real indeed.

It's a sort of unknown front. You haven't heard much about it. You hear about the war in Africa or the Solomons; but you never hear about the Aleutian war. The very name of the islands sounds illusory, vague. You're not entirely sure where they are, until you look at a map of Alaska, which curiously resembles a profile of Uncle

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Sam, and you see the Aleutians, like Uncle Sam's chin-whiskers, wagging far out across the Pacific toward the clutching fingers of Japan. You are surprised, when you measure it on a globe, to find that they stretch so far west. Even Dutch Harbor, at the beginning of the chain, is five hundred miles west of Hawaii; our base in the Andreanoffs is actually parallel with New Zealand; and the Jap-occupied island of Attu, nine hundred miles from our own Naval base at Dutch Harbor, is only seven hundred miles from the big Japanese Naval base at Paramashuri in the Kuriles. You are further surprised, looking at your globe, to see that the long sickle-curve of the islands slices midway through the shortest route from Seattle to Tokyo. You realize that someday these neglected islands could be a springboard to the heart of Japan itself. You realize for the first time the significance of Gen. Billy Mitchell's statement: "Who controls Alaska, controls the Pacific. . . ."

An unknown front: the least-known and loneliest of all our far-flung battlefronts. The men who fly here—the Army and Navy pilots who have engaged the enemy virtually single-handed during the past year—have been fighting an unknown war. It isn't a glamorous war. They do not fight a battle of blazing guns and dog-fights in mid-air with lithe derisive Zeros half-rolling toward them out of the sun. They fight an unseen foe, and they fly and die alone. Their enemy is the fog. Their battle-

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field is a boulder-strewn beach scattered with telltale bits of twisted metal, or a snow-covered peak where the torn wing of a plane flaps emptily in the wind, or an icy strait into which a flaming bomber hisses into silence like an extinguished cigarette. They do not parachute to safety and a hero's medal; they struggle for a few minutes in the numbing water, until their 'chute fills and drags them out of sight forever. Their citation reads "Missing. . . ."

I lived with these men at our farthest Aleutian outpost. I ate and slept and flew with them; I know the kind of war they've had to fight. I know that these men in our Air Forces—the ones who come through—are the toughest and finest fliers in the skies today. . . .

The islands are only a series of dots on a map, and that is all they were in fact, as I saw them for the first time from the air; a series of isolated peaks, staggered across the north Pacific, separated sometimes by as much as a hundred miles of open water: fog-shrouded, barren, cold and still as death. Once a million years ago this majestic chain of mountains linked the American continent with Asia; some time the whole range foundered and sank, the water rose clear up to timber-line, and only a few smoking summits remained above the waves. Today a skim of ocean covers all the rest: the jagged cliffs below you as you fly are former mountaintops,

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those exposed reefs over which the surf curls and seethes were the rims of craters once. You think of verdant valleys buried now under tons of green water, populated with shadowy pop-eyed fish that cruise their drowned and silent forests.

I was flying westward from Dutch Harbor along the north side of the islands, bound for our last lonely outpost in the Andreanoffs, two-thirds of the way down the chain, only a bomb's throw from Jap-held Kiska. Our lumbering PBY—described feelingly by the pilot as the only plane that moves faster on the assembly-line than in the air—followed a zigzag course, ducking an oncoming storm-front. The Bering Sea was a flat gray meadow, and flocks of white clouds like sheep browsed placidly across it in the wan winter afternoon. They looked innocent enough, but Lieutenant Clark eyed them dubiously: Aleutian fliers have an unholy respect for clouds. "I'd rather face a Zero in the air," he explained, "than zero-zero on the ground."

The storm was closing in fast. Already the peaks of the Andreanoffs were lost in the ocean-colored sky. The sides of the mountains ahead were white with snow, but all the lower slopes were bare and covered with olive-drab grass, giving the islands a strikingly military look. Unlike the interior of Alaska, where the thermometer drops to seventy below, the temperature in the Aleutians in winter seldom gets to zero: snow falls

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one day and melts the next, and the roads are alternately hip-deep in mud or frozen into a badlands of ruts and holes. An endless succession of trucks and tractors and jeeps was bumping over them now—construction never halts in our island-base—and, as we circled the camp-area, we could see the square khaki tents and the familiar round-topped quonset-huts dug into the sandy hill-sides at crazy angles. The rolling tundra was a maze of trailing telephone-wires, concealed gun-emplacements, foxholes, ditches. Several fighter-planes were patrolling overhead, and a flock of ubiquitous ravens wheeled and banked with them in the leaden sky. There is a legend among the fighter-pilots that the ravens in the islands once were white, but they tried to make a turn with a P-38 and they all blacked out. Fighter-pilots have a fierce pride in their swift ships, you find, and look with the disdain of youth on the antiquated bomber-pilots, many of whom have reached the ripe old age of twenty-three or twenty-four.

We could not see the field itself. A snow-squall blanketed the runway; Lieutenant Clark let down gingerly through the risky approaches to the field, and tried an instrument-landing. Our wheels touched half-way down the metal strip, and we braked to a halt with only inches to spare. He licked perspiration from his lips, despite the cold, and turned and taxied back down the strip; and for the first time I noticed a strik-



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ing scene of devastation at the side of the runway. Several PBY's were overturned and crumpled; a B-24 was lying upside down with its back broken; a pea-shooter was buried nose-first in the bank, both rudders missing. "Enemy raid?" I inquired hollowly.

"The real enemy," he nodded. "Williwaw hit us night before last. Eighty miles an hour. We weighted down the ships with oil-drums, we even tied them to tractors, but it didn't do much good." He guided the plane towards a ground-crew mechanic in G.I. parka and leather boots, standing with arms upraised to indicate our parking-place. "This weather around here," grimly, "we have to use a 500-pound bomb for a wind-sock."

For the battle of the Aleutians—the year-round battle our fliers must fight—is first and last a battle of weather. Distance and weather. Or, rather, distance times weather. A battle of fog and sleet and sudden squalls—CAVU one minute and SNAFU the next—and freezing clouds that can load the wings of a bomber with a ton of ice in less than a minute, and dreaded williwaws that rack a ship and drop it a couple of thousand feet in a breath: all of it multiplied by a thousand miles of the coldest and cruelest and loneliest ocean in the world. There are no emergency landing-fields in the islands, no convenient potato-patch into which a pilot may set his plane; the beaches are rocky

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and forbidding; the water is so cold that a flier who lands in it can stay alive at most for twenty minutes. The wind shifts with incalculable speed: a pilot may taxi up a runway in bright sunshine, and find the field blotted out by the time he turns to head back for the take-off. The fog, winter and summer, is universal; it is considered good flying-weather when you can look out in two directions at the same time. "We don't think it's too thick to fly," they say, "until you can't see your co-pilot."

Understand the weather, and you understand the problem of blasting the Japs off their rock by sporadic air-attacks alone. For the north Pacific is, literally, the birthplace of storms. The cold air blowing off the great Siberian land-mass strikes the moisture-laden air of the warm Japanese current; the great ocean cauldron bubbles and boils, and a succession of lows—like jets of steam from the spout of a tea-kettle—shoot eastward one by one along the island chain. I remember one day's weather-map that showed five separate storm-fronts moving east at the same time. And the Japs, well aware of our weather problems, enjoy the double advantage of being on the defensive—it is a military axiom that weather always favors the defender—and of being located at the western end of the islands where the weather begins.

There is a phrase you hear all up and down the Aleutians. When on rare occasions the sun actually

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shines, it is known as Senatorial Weather. Last summer, it seems, a Senate Investigating Committee from Washington arrived in the islands on the only clear day in weeks, spent approximately one hour at the Army field near Dutch Harbor—six hundred safe miles from the enemy—and departed again, still in perfect sunshine, for the States. There they assured reporters that all these alibis of Aleutian fog were grossly exaggerated, and one Congressman gave with some rather tart remarks about this so-called one-way weather that favors the Japs but not us.

The Congressman, odd as it seems, was right. The weather is literally one-way here. Storm fronts move from west to east. The weather makes up at Attu, like a commuter's local, and the Japs who live at the end of the line always get the best seats. Not only can they take advantage of a storm to get in supplies; they know just how long the storm will take to pass over our own bases to the eastward, and consequently how long it will be before we can strike again. When the weather breaks, they simply pull in their necks until our bombers have gone over, and then utilize the next ten days of fog to rebuild their installations and ready themselves for the next attack. Who holds Attu, holds the weather for tomorrow.

There is another theory that bemuses the pilots in the islands: the leave-the-Japs-on-Kiska-they-can't-hurt-

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us school of thought. Recently Bernard Hubbard; self-styled Glacier Priest and constant discoverer of Alaska—whose annual return to the Territory is awaited by the residents with the same stoic resignation they display towards the mosquito—delivered himself of the opinion that the occupation of Kiska was really a very clever trick on the Japs, and that we were only too glad to have them stay there where we could shoot at them whenever we wished, like tin ducks in a shooting gallery. "Leave the Japs on Kiska," he was quoted as saying in a recent interview, "we love to go out and bomb 'em." The pilots in the Aleutians, who fly regularly in weather that would ground any ordinary operations at home, feel that if these home-strategists would fly with them some day as they fight their way through the zero-zero fog, they would be a little less enthusiastic about the fun of blasting the Japs.

For flying in the Aleutians is mostly by guess and by God and by the seat of your pants. There is no precedent to guide you, no background of experience to fall back on. The first land-plane in the entire history of the Aleutians was flown here one year ago by the Air Forces. The Army pioneered winter-flying in the islands; nobody thought it could be done until they tried it. Radio-beams are distorted and undependable. The elevations of mountains, as recorded on official charts, may err by as much as a thousand feet. Altimeter set-

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tings, vital in accurate high-altitude bombings, must be readjusted constantly, pilots report an inch of mercury change in their pressure reading in the 700-mile hop between Kodiak and Dutch. Instrument take-offs and landings are routine. They tell you of a squadron of Flying Fortresses caught in a fog so complete that the rest of the bombers in the formation could not see their leader's plane dead ahead. "All we could do was to come down fifty feet off the water," they relate, "and follow the wake on the water made by the blast of air from his props."

They tell you other and more apocryphal stories of flying in the islands. Of fog so thick that two P-40's landed on it and parked there overnight until the weather cleared. Or of the PBY pilot, groping his way home through typical Aleutian weather, who glanced out of the cockpit window and saw a seagull flap slowly to a halt and perch on the wing of his plane. He set his ship down then and there. Said if it was too tough for a seagull to fly, it was too tough for him. They even tell you, if you will listen, of another Navy pilot, lost over the ocean in a total fog, who spotted a lone duck skimming ahead of him through the mist. "I knew he wouldn't fly into a cliff," the pilot insisted later, "so I just fell in behind and flew formation on the duck till we got to shore . . ."

An unknown front. Maybe you hear of it once in a

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while. Maybe you pick up your morning newspaper, and somewhere at the bottom of page fourteen you read another laconic Navy communiqué: "A force of Mitchell medium bombers escorted by Lightning fighters was intercepted by Jap Zero float-planes while proceeding to attack two enemy cargo ships in Kiska Harbor. Two Lightnings and one Zero were shot down during the fighting which ensued. The Mitchells continued to attack the enemy shipping with uncertain results. One of our bombers is missing."

Well, maybe that's enough. I remember that raid. It was just a routine mission; they go on all the time. There were several more like it while I was there. No need to give it a great build-up. No need of recalling the sight of those slim and lovely Lightnings crumpling earthward under the guns of six Zeros that had been hiding upstairs. No need of dwelling on the memory of that stricken bomber, scrawling a defiant farewell in smoke against the sky as it exploded on the waters of Kiska Bay. No need even of mentioning the lone peashooter, its gas-line punctured, slowly bleeding to death as it struggled heavily and more heavily over the icy water in a desperate race for home.

No; a battle's a break from the dull routine. It's fun while it lasts, and it only lasts three or four minutes anyway. You get out of it or else you don't, and if you get out of it you fly home, provided the weather hasn't

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socked in the field in the meantime. You buzz the field if it's been a good mission, and, if it hasn't, you land quietly, and the ambulance is there to take out the men who can't get out themselves. The ground-crews gather around your ship and inspect the damage reverently, and you go to mess and eat canned Vienna sausage and bread without butter, and some one admires the very elegant furrow plowed across the leather collar of your flying-jacket. After chow, you go over to the hospital and have the fragment of shell taken out of your neck, so you can keep the piece in your wallet as a souvenir.

It's the weather that's the real enemy here. The solid overcast, the williwaws, the mud and mist and endless numbing rain, the days and weeks of waiting (no town to go to, no beer, no mail from home) and the mission called off again at the last moment because still more weather has moved in from the west. It isn't glamorous, it isn't the stuff that makes movies; but it's the story of our unknown war.

### 3. *Mission Over Kiska*

There was a large relief-map of Kiska in the Pilot's Alert Quonset Hut, down near the line. It was made of plaster-of-paris, painted bright green and brown and blue, and it rested horizontally across two saw-horses. It was very popular with the combat-crews, because Kiska Harbor was just the right size and shape to accommodate the average pilot's rear-end. If you sat with your back to Kiska Volcano, the base of your spine rested exactly on the Jap camp-area at Salmon Lagoon, the heavily fortified ridges of North and South Head furnished an admirable support for either buttock, and you straddled Little Kiska in the harbor's mouth like the pummel of a saddle . . .

It was on North and South Heads, guarding the harbor, that the anti-aircraft was most severe. You forgot instantly those stories you'd read of a few beleaguered Nips clinging by their fingertips to a rock, when you flew over Kiska for the first time on a routine bombing-mission. Here was no easy rock to take, you realized. Here was a veritable Bering Sea Malta, its sheltered harbor protected by the enfolding hills, its base honey-combed by underground passages, its approaches



## MISSION OVER KISKA

guarded by ack-ack as powerful as that of a full-sized task-force.

You came in low beneath the overcast, flying in elements of two, the rest of the medium bombers strung out on either side of you, the slim nervous fighter-planes following in an intent echelon on your tail. You were surprised by two things, as you first gazed down on Kiska through the bomber's glass nose: how small it looked—the total Jap installations, including the sub-base, covered only a couple of square miles, and the congested camp-area itself was not much more than a city-block—and how quiet and deserted it seemed. The snow was melting along the volcano's sides; the lowlands were dotted with patches of green, as pleasant as a New Hampshire meadow in the early spring.

Everything was ominously quiet, as you came over the ridge. There were no excited Japs running to man the guns, no troops stampeding up the streets, no sign of human life anywhere. You wondered for a disappointed moment if every one had pulled out and gone home. Small but distinct below you were the solidly built structures of the camp-area, the buildings well revetted and thatched with straw, the orderly streets lined with telephone-poles. You could see the two big hangars at the water's edge, and the ramp leading up to them. You saw piles of fresh lumber, trucks and tractors, even a row of 'rickshas with their empty shafts

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resting parallel on the ground. It gave you a funny feeling to see Jap 'rickshas on American soil.

You were starting your bombing-run, over the silent camp, and now you could see the foxholes and zigzag trenches and the neat deserted roads leading towards the adjoining sub-base, towards the radio station on the hill behind the camp, towards the gun-emplacements on the ridges. A couple of transports squatted in the harbor like fat hens, their barges huddled around them like a brood of chicks. And still there was no movement, no sign of life: nothing but the stabbing orange-yellow tracers fanning the sky, the regular scarlet flashes of the heavier artillery like a signal-light in a control tower, the ever-increasing puffs of black smoke that materialized silently, leisurely in the air around you and behind you as the bombardier tripped the switch and a string of fat blunt bombs waddled downward towards the target . . .

Each morning, after breakfast, the combat-crews would gather in the Alert Hut to hear the day's mission briefed. They would pile out of the mess-hall hurriedly, zipping up their fleece-lined leather flying-suits, clamber into a waiting recon car, and jolt down to the hut through the inky blackness of an Alaska winter morning, hoping against hope that today's weather would be okay to make the run. They would pack in the car ten-deep, sitting on one another's laps, draping

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themselves along the fenders, straddling the radiator, singing. "It's a grand old flag, da da *da da da da* . . ." "I bet I've logged more hours in this recon than I have in the airplane." "I thought I'd wait till I found out if we were going on a mission this morning before I took a laxative." "If we go on a mission, pal, you won't need a laxative." "Da da *da da da da* . . ." "Anybody checked the weather yet?"

The briefing was usually informal. The squadron commander would stand beside a chart at one end of the room, and the pilots and navigators and bombardiers would gather around him, lounging against the wall, straddling a bench backward, resting an arm on a neighbor's padded leather shoulder, smoking, listening. He would talk in a low pleasant voice, quite casually, as though he were outlining a play in football.

"We're going to climb to about nine or ten thousand on the way out. We'll go north of the chain, come around the Volcano to Pillar Rock, turn in towards the the island here—" indicating the spot on the chart "—and make a ninety-degree diving turn. All flights javelin right. First element will use a 6500 base altitude; second element 5500. Start your bombing run about here." He points to the chart again. "First element will take the hangars, the second the sub-base. Use a loose formation except against fighter opposition, in which case we'll close up as in regular tactics. Ship-

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ping in the harbor gets first priorities, of course. Remember, on your bombing-run the co-pilot will maintain airspeed, the pilot flies the ship. Rendezvous five miles north of here," putting his finger on a dot on the chart. "We'll have fighter coverage. In case a peashooter has any trouble, you, Jim—" he jabs his thumb towards a pilot beside you, who nods silently "—will lead it back to the base. Maintain radio silence on the way out. Standard frequency. Any questions?"

"Will we have much Zero opposition?"

"I think so, yes."

"Anti-aircraft?"

"The Navy communiqué will state as usual that there was no anti-aircraft fire," drily, "but look out for those gremlins." He takes out his watch. "Everybody synchronize their watches. We ought to hear about the weather in an hour or so."

The group relaxes; now there is nothing to do but wait. And wait, and wait. A cribbage game starts up, some one goes to work on a jigsaw puzzle, the men light cigarettes, loosen their flying-suits, sprawl in chairs and bury themselves in six-months-old magazines, fling their leather jackets on the floor and stretch out on them and talk. They talk a language all their own, a jargon peculiar to pilots. "I had to goose it coming in . . ." "Boy, did I sweat it out . . ." "Then I shovelled the coal to it and gunned it around again . . ." Strange

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vivid phrases strike your ear: flying language. Bend back the throttles. Hang it on the props. Plunk the tail in first. Balloon over the runway. Milk up the flaps. Some one recalls the last mission: "When that Zero came alongside you, Dave, did the Jap look like that one you always see in the movies, the one that grabs his stomach and bends over and goes 'Ugh?'" "Six no trump." "Say, I wonder why we can't drop a bomb right down inside the crater of Kiska Volcano and touch it off." "Da da *da da* . . ." "Shut up," from the cribbage game, "we're trying to add." "Shouldn't it be almost time to hear about the weather?"

They tell you the hard-luck story of Sammy, little bombardier from New York's lower East Side. It seems that after Sammy won his bombardier's wings he got engaged to a girl, and he went down town to buy her a ring. "It costs five hunnerd smackers," Sammy himself interrupts eagerly, "but when I tell the jeweler I'm a bombardier, he claps me on the back and says 'My boy, I'll knock off a hunnerd bucks for every bomb you drop on Germany.'" Sammy sighs. "So what happens? So I get sent to Alaska."

Or they tell you about the Colonel's dog. The Colonel's dog is a big Siberian husky named Skook, and whenever the Colonel leads a mission, he takes Skook in the bomber with him. Nobody is quite sure how many times Skook has made the run over the target, but

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the Colonel never leaves him back at the base. Claims a dog isn't safe back at the base, with all those trucks going by . . .

Or they tell you about the B-17 pilot, returning from a photographic mission over Attu, whose fuel-transfer pump went out of commission and his gas supply began to run low. An enlisted man investigated the fuse-box, discovered that a short had blown them out. The pilot met the emergency by unpinning the gold Second Lieutenant's bar from his shoulder and using it as an emergency fuse, so they could work the pump to get home. "Maybe a Second Lieutenant's bar is only worth \$150 a month," laconically, "but it saved a third of a million dollars' worth of airplane."

Or one of the cribbage-players, laying down his hand, recalls plaintively the only time he ever got hurt in a raid. A 30-caliber armor-piercing shell hit the radio set, ricocheted off the structural frame at the rear of his armored seat, bounced off the windshield support, and landed in his lap. He picked it up with his glove, and absently dropped it into his rear pants-pocket; and the still-hot shell gave him a bad burn on his rump. "Had to go to the doc and get it treated," he adds. "That Kiska anti-aircraft is dangerous."

You wait and wait, and finally the phone rings; and the room is suddenly very quiet while the squadron commander picks up the phone. They know the answer

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by the look on his face. If his face falls, that means the mission is off again, and some one swears softly, and they go back to their cribbage and magazines and more waiting. But if his face gets very bright and tough-looking, then chairs scrape back hurriedly, zippers are yanked up, they grab briefcases and charts and pile through the door, jostling, shouting over a shoulder: "Keep dinner hot for me." "If anybody has to bail out, remember to fill out your Form One first." "It's a grand old flag, da da *da* da . . ." "Nobody touch that jigsaw puzzle, I'm going to finish it when I get back."

But he never finishes it; he never gets back. It was a tough mission today. Usually they buzz the field when they get back from a mission; but today they come in quietly, one by one. The squadron commander lands his airplane first and taxies to a halt; the ground-crew swarm over the ship eagerly to count the holes. There are sixty-four holes. He murmurs apologetically to his crew-chief: "I'm afraid I didn't do your airplane much good, Sergeant."

"No, sir," with a reproachful look, "you sure didn't."

Jim's plane is late landing; they had a little trouble on the way. It seems one of the bombs jumped its shackles and hung suspended halfway through the bomb-bay doors. The other bombs spilled out over it, but the first bomb still dangled there, its fuse cocked, and they couldn't get their bomb-bay doors shut again.

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The bomb-bay opening on a medium is so small you can't get down there with your 'chute on; so the tail-gunner—he was the smallest member of the crew—took off his 'chute and lowered himself down through the bottom of the plane by his hands. There he dangled in space over the Bering Sea until his groping feet found support. Somehow he balanced himself, bent down and released the bomb.

Russ shoots a landing with one punctured tire. A slug from a Jap machine gun had driven up through the left engine nacelle and made a two-inch gash in the rubber; but Russ wobbles the hot little ship to a safe halt, flat tire and all, and sticks his head out of the cockpit. "Bombardier's dead," he announces briefly. Russ's bombardier was Sammy. You wonder fleetingly whether Sammy's girl will ever know about that five hundred dollar ring . . .

I was on the line when the last plane landed that day. It had had a little trouble, too. The anti-aircraft had done quite a job on the little bomber: shot off the elevator and rudder trim-tabs, put a bullet through the control pedestal, hemstitched the glass tail. But the slug that did the real damage came in through the right side of the cockpit, blew the co-pilot's hands full of jagged metal, glanced off the window-handle on the opposite side, and drilled a hole clean through the pilot's foot. The crash-trucks were waiting on the line as they ap-



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proached. With pilot and co-pilot both crippled, a landing was impossible; except that in the Aleutians they do the impossible every day. The co-pilot, both his hands dangling helpless, handled the rudder and brakes with his feet. The pilot, without the use of his feet, fingered the throttles. Together, working in perfect teamwork, they set the ship down evenly on the strip; and the co-pilot climbed out, the lap of his leather flying-pants sticky with blood. "Just a scratch," he shrugged, wrapping a handkerchief around his hand as we walked back towards the mess-hall together. "Probably a piece of that Sixth Avenue El we sold 'em."

"I suppose you took a sulpha pill when you were hit?" Every plane is supposed to carry a small supply of these drugs for use in an emergency. The co-pilot seemed a little embarrassed by my question.

"As a matter of fact," he admitted, "I didn't know how bad off the pilot was, and I figured with our airplane so badly stove up we might have to make a forced landing somewhere, and there were only a few pills, and, hell, you know how it is . . ."

I know how it is. I've lived with these men; I know what it's like, day after day. They are not heroes. Don't call them heroes; they don't want that. They are not Intrepid Birdmen, or Rover Boys of the Air, or Supermen; they are ordinary guys, doing a job, getting cold and wet and lonely and not liking it any better than

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you would. Heroes are glamorous; heroes don't have wet feet. Over and over the pilots used to ask me: "When you write about us, don't make us out heroes" and I used to wonder why; but maybe that's why. Maybe they felt, if they were heroes, the folks back home would put them up on a pedestal and leave them there and forget them. Heroes can take care of themselves. Heroes don't need us. Heroes can fight our war for us, and the rest of us at home can go on living our lives as usual. Heroes never get lonely . . .

On the way back from the line I glanced in the door of the Alert Hut. Another group of combat-crews had gathered, waiting for the afternoon's mission. One of them had brushed the half-finished jigsaw puzzle into a heap, and patiently, as I watched, he began fitting the pieces together again.

## 4. *Three Stories*

The three ensuing accounts of actual combat-missions in the Aleutians were written by members of the crews themselves: scrawled on a pad of blue-lined paper by the light of a lantern swinging from the ridge-pole of a tent, or hammered out on a battered typewriter in a tin quonset to the steady drum of rain on the roof, and given to me when I was in the islands. They tell—as a mere observer could never tell—the kind of job our men are doing. They tell more than that: they tell the kind of men who are doing that job. They are reproduced here by special permission of the War Department.

The first description, the story of a bombing-run over Kiska, was written by Second Lieut. Nelson H. Drake, young co-pilot of a heavy bomber. I happen to think it is one of the finest pieces of reporting that has come out of this war. . . .

I

FIREPLACE

By Nelson H. Drake  
2nd Lt., A. C.

Behind us to the east lay Kiska Harbor, ravaged like Warsaw, burning like a heap of excelsior. Along the shore line intermittent red bursts, belching pillows of ugly black smoke, thundered and echoed from cliff to cliff; they told the story of detonating ammunition dumps. Soldiers—hundreds of them—scrambled for the nearby hills from which came desultory rifle fire, a pitiful gesture against our overwhelming preponderance of air power! In the water, smoke still hovered over two badly damaged submarines; nearer to the docks, like a dying swan, stood the smoldering ruins of a sleek, gray, four engine Kawasaki flying boat. Farther out huge geysers of salt spray were settling gently like rain over the decks of two giant transports—thousand-pound bombs with delayed fuses had exploded beneath their hulls. Sailors, thrashing in the water from an abandoned ship, tried to reach shore, while others, exhausted, clung to the floating wing of a vanquished Zero.

As we turned northward and looked back, the sky over the westward side of the island was filled with air-

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planes—small ones—fighters. Round and round, up and down they went, twin tail-booms of the Lockheed Lightnings, sharp spear-like noses of the Bell Airacobras, and the low slung pontoons of the enemy Zeros, each struggling for supremacy. Eager for the kill, but outnumbered at least six to one and pounced on from every conceivable angle, the Jap was no match in this *melée*. Even as I looked, two Zeros seemed to have been struck at once. Downward they plunged leaving two thin trails of smoke behind them and crashed to the waves. Passing the north end we turned southward, and the dogfight, moving eastward, appeared to be cutting off our path. Only one enemy ship remained and it was on the tail of a Lightning. Quickly, like darts, two more P-38's whipped into the rescue on either side of the Jap—their guns blazed! A streaking flash, a puff of smoke, and two gallant airmen welded in one metal mess plummeted to the sea. . . .

But every story has a beginning, every battle a cause. Outside of helping a couple of fighter pilots bag two four-engine Japanese patrol bombers, and accidentally running smack into an enemy convoy of three warships and one cargo ship while we were flying twenty feet off the water in a dense fog, my contacts with the boys from the Rising Sun have been limited to bombing Kiska from 30,000 feet (a mission, I might say, that is

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most uninteresting if accomplished more than once). As co-pilot for the now-well-known "Bird-dog" Mac-Williams, I'll admit we've saddled every type of flying the Aleutians have to offer. In the course of three months, we've flown two different kinds of airplanes for two different squadrons, and our assignments have ranged from the early morning milk-and-weather run to Attu to the late afternoon Dutch Harbor beer detail. Now, of course, if you knew my family, how they think I can handle the enemy by myself, how they can't understand why I'm not a Major yet, how wonderful they think my cousin is because he joined the Navy (and at this writing is placidly cooling his heels at a swell desk job) then you'd know that if I went home without at least one good war yarn, I'd be a complete bust, a washout! On the other hand, if you knew me, you'd know damn well I'm not going to stick my neck out and try to be a Frank Merriwell just because my cousin got better marks in school.

So I had some misgivings last Friday when Operations assigned Mac and myself ten practice bombs, with instructions to see what kind of pattern we could make on a rock from fifty feet off the water. Well, now, wasn't that something! At 30,000 feet anti-aircraft can't touch you, but at 50 feet, David could hit you in the eye with a sling shot! Back at Operations I said, "Gee, Major, looks like we're going to have some real *fun*."

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But in our hut I said, "Well, here's where I get my fanny shot off!"

Next day it was more of the same thing; only this time Colonel Eareckson, our group commander, came along, bringing with him all our heavy bombers and, thank God, about thirty pursuit. At least we would have fighter escort and, what was more important, protection! That night the camp buzzed! There was going to be a big raid, the greatest ever seen up here! When, nobody knew; but soon—soon. Yes, but how were they going to get short-ranged pursuits all the way to Kiska and back?

Then we heard—Fireplace!

Fireplace, the name for our new landing field, half-way to Kiska. Construction had started two days ago; but how could they ever finish it before the present good weather ended? God, just think of it! After months of bomber missions, unescorted, prey to every Zero the Japs could muster, prey to the heartless north Pacific storms, over-long flights, buffeted by winds, lost in fogs—at last we would have a fair chance to show our stuff. At last those yellow sons of Hirohito would start regretting the day they tangled with Uncle Sam. Far into the night we talked. Earlier a plane sent to Dutch Harbor had returned, laden with beer, and with this to spur our imaginations we dreamed our way to Tokyo.

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In the morning a dispatcher from Operations woke Mac and me. "Orders, gentlemen, are for you to pack, just a bedroll and tooth brush, and be ready for take-off to Fireplace in two hours."

"Well, Mac," I said, "I guess this is it."

"This is it, boy," he answered. True, I had expected the push any day, but not this soon. Hell, I hadn't even made out my "local will," distributing excess cigarettes, candy, razor blades, and my coveted air mattress among the fellows in the hut: forget-me-nots in case we didn't return. A meeting to discuss the plans of the trip delayed our take-off two hours. It wasn't till four P.M. that we sighted Fireplace. . . .

The fellow that named it certainly must have seen it exactly as we did, and under the same conditions. Far to the west the sun was setting, casting deep red and orange rays to the eastern sky. Low hanging misty cloud masses close to the ground absorbed this coloring and gave the surrounding atmosphere a deep eerie pink. This was truly the Aleutian Shangri-La! Ringed with snow-capped peaks on all sides, except the east from whence we came, our little harbor and landing field were completely hidden until we were directly overhead. Sharp-eyed Jap patrol boats would have a hard time finding this. To our left, just offshore, lay the boats. Barges, supply ships, troop ships, all had brought material necessary for building a field, includ-



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ing tractors, graders, and the huge steel mat that was our runway. And near them were their protectors, the great men-of-war that had served as convoy.

Poor Mac! We were having landing gear trouble; the nose wheel wouldn't go down. Soon everyone else had landed but us. Round and round we circled. The sky grew a deeper red, then lost all color, the field became less and less visible. At last the crew chief reported, "Wheel down, sir." Down we went, a beautiful approach; he "greased" it in. Lower and lower went the nose as we settled. Lower! Lower! Mac strained at the wheel. Bang! A terrific scraping noise of ripping steel. We skidded sideways into the soft, wet dirt. Our nose wheel had collapsed! A crowd had gathered by the time we stepped from the giant Liberator. In front one person stood head and shoulders above the rest, a silver star shining on his cap. General Butler, Commander of the Eleventh Air Force, the first general officer ever to lead a bombing raid personally over Kiska, stepped forward. We expected to catch hell.

"Nice landing, Mac," said the tall, distinguished, gray-headed officer, "and thanks for getting off the mat, you saved a lot of steel. You can have one of the spares for tomorrow."

"Hey, Mac," a familiar voice called, "where have you been, boy? I began to think they'd left you out of this

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show." Ambrose! First P-38 pilot ever to shoot an enemy plane down in combat, his victim a giant four engine Kawasaki-97 flying boat we had flushed out of the clouds for him. "Hy'a, Drake, glad to see you," as I shook his hand. "I've got a jeep here, and you two are coming over to the fighter mess and have some *good* chow."

Unlike our former home, Fireplace presented a picture of nothing but tents, scattered over a large area of green wet tundra. A rutted dirt road served as the only link between the bomber command and the pursuit. Save for the mass of planes on the field which we were leaving behind, the little island was barren and bleak. Nowhere could I find the wooden mess halls, nor the quonset-huts for sleeping quarters and field operations. Inside the mess tent of the fighters, the ground hadn't even been cleared. No tables, no chairs, no orderlies—nothing. We stood in line up to our knees in the wet grass, and we ate squatted on our haunches in the same grass. Ah, but what food! We had hamburger steaks; steaks that even Bill Rhode, Mac Kriendler and "Toots" Shor would admit they couldn't equal. Next to us sat Colonel Morrell, leader of the Airacobras, with Major Jackson, leader of the Lockheed Lightnings. Major Jackson still rests at Kiska; a more daring flier, a more courageous fighter, or a more gallant gentleman we shall never see.

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We could hear them discussing tomorrow's plans, how they would first protect the bombers, how they would attack shore batteries, how they would recover. We told Ambrose our plans, what we'd been assigned, our position in the formation, and our objective. "Mac," he volunteered, "I'll be in there ahead strafing gun positions on your right, but I'll be keeping an eye on you, and if any bastard Jap Zero gets near you, I'll blast him out of this world." And he meant it. . . .

A light mist was falling. Where it came from I couldn't tell. Directly above the stars were shining, but around me on all sides a fog was forming, closing in. It was cold, damp. Behind me the great hull of the B-24 stood, poised for action. Inside there were lights. The crew going over last minute details. I stamped my feet, slapped my arms together. I took out my flashlight, looked at my watch. Four o'clock. I lit a cigarette. I was waiting for Mac.

I belched. A bad taste lingered in my mouth from the meal I had eaten thirty minutes before: sausage. I wondered if it would be my last. There had been faces around a camp fire—nameless faces, indistinguishable. There had been no noise, no one spoke—only the crackle of the coals, the clink of mess kits. A little apart from the rest, his figure outlined in the headlights

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of his jeep, had stood Colonel Eareckson. Finishing my breakfast I had edged over to him.

"Sir," I had asked, breaking the silence, "can you advise me the best place for our top turret to concentrate his fire?"

"Where are you going?" He had seemed to whisper. I noticed that Mac had joined us.

"We break to the right of the harbor, Colonel. Our objective is the camp."

"Good. Have your gunners, and I mean every possible one, train his fire on North Head. They can't miss it. Give 'em every piece of lead you've got, and remember to fly under it, keep low, *stick together*. That's your only salvation."

"Yes, sir," and my stomach had dropped. I hope I smiled.

"Good luck, boys, and give 'em hell." The gray moustache crinkled, dark eyes glistened in the glare of the headlights, our number one fighting man had smiled farewell.

It must have been an impressive sight as one by one the largest array of heavy bombers assembled in the Aleutian War to date, all loaded with dynamite, roared down the mat, brought each nose up, strained a second, then lumbered into the air. And, after us, masses of pursuit. I don't know what the workmen thought, as we thundered over their heads; but were I one of them,

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I would have been mighty proud. In four days they had moved in all their supplies, and, working day and night, had constructed a field and a runway as fine as any in the islands. And all this out of desolate swamp and tundra, right under the noses of the enemy. Neither do I know what the Navy thought as we took our positions over them in the harbor; but were I the admiral, I might have considered that here at last was the pay off for the terrible toll of defenseless Catalina flying boats. Here's where we wipe forever clean that slate. "Remember Dutch Harbor."

During the past hour our speed had increased from 175 miles per hour indicated air speed to 195. Our altitude had decreased from 500 feet to 50. Above our heads lay an overcast, with occasional holes allowing the sun to pour through; patches of rain squalls reached down to the water forming stalactites as in a cave. The effect was eerie as we swerved to avoid them. Our silence above the hum of the engines was oppressive, intent, our eyes were glued to the leader. I wondered how many of us would return. Would the little Japs be taken completely by surprise, could we slip in the harbor so low and so fast that they wouldn't get a shot. Or were they even now fingering their triggers, smiling, waiting for the kill? Laven, who had been there a week before, had said that when he attacked, they were so

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astonished, so incredulous as even to wave at him as he cut them down. He'd even caught a line of men waiting for chow near the silent coastal batteries, and the slaughter had been merciless, complete. But this morning it seemed hopeless to think the Jap would be caught so far off guard. I thought of Colin Kelly, Wermuth—

"Okay, boy, there it is," said Mac through his teeth, "give me some more R.P.M." And over the interphone, "Crew to your battle stations! I want every man to stick by his guns till I say he can leave. If we're hit and have to bail out, there'll be plenty of Catalinas to pick you up. If we have a forced landing, run to the west side of the island. Our pursuit will cover your path. Fire straight at the gun flashes until they stop. Use every last round of ammunition on this ship. Everybody got that? Okay, let's go!"

About ten miles off through the haze stood the outline of a great Volcano—Kiska. I'd know it anywhere: in the middle of the Gobi, or on the Hudson River. Lower and lower we flew. The Colonel was on the water. Faster and faster the pace; the formation tightened. I glanced at Mac. Blood vessels rose on his forehead, perspiration sparkled from his pores. I looked beyond his shoulder. The Airacobras shot ahead as they dropped their belly tanks, which bounced and skimmed along the waves like a school of porpoises.

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The lead-ship swerved slightly to the right. We were headed straight for the bluffs protecting the entrance to the harbor.

It was then that my eye caught the flashes, like sudden stabs of sunlight on the windshields of oncoming cars. Only more, hundreds more, and all along the shoreline. Yet where were the shells? Had they gone over our heads? Whish, whish, whish, there they were! About half a mile in front of us, spouts of water rose. I couldn't count them. They began rising everywhere. I looked at my watch: 9:40 A.M. Three miles away now, and all hell broke loose! The entire shore lighted up with flashes, they were laying a barrage, a wall of water. I glanced at our air speed—220 MPH!

And now, in the distance, Colonel Morrell in his P-39 had reached the land. His guns blazed. Zoooom! He chandelled straight up, kicked over hard, and dove straight on his prey like a chicken hawk. That section of lights went out. Now we were so close, so perilously close to the bluffs that it seemed a certainty all would crash headlong into them. Suddenly Colonel Eareckson showed us the kind of flying that had long since won him the D.S.C. Cutting swiftly left, then back right, he faced us square into the bottleneck of the harbor. Up, up high Mac and I were thrown, then down we careened back into position. Prop wash! My heart was in my mouth.

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Tennyson had said "—cannon to the right of them, cannon to the left of them, cannon in front of them—into the valley of death—" No valley here; these were the very jaws of death. From the bluff on our right to the bluff on our left measured a scant 200 yards. Directly in front of us lay three large transports, their decks lit up like Xmas trees! Each position fired every caliber of weapon Kiska possessed; and every weapon was manned by our deadliest of enemies. We were running the gauntlet of the most murderous of cross fire—point blank range! Like Roman candles the tracer bullets sparked and whizzed by, above and below us, in front and behind us. Our own guns spat in reply. Our own tracers raced up the sides of the bluffs and bounded into the protective parapets; others ricocheted from the rocks to the water and danced and glided along the tops of the waves. The din inside our cockpit was overwhelming. And I, paralyzed, fascinated, helpless, could only stare at this show of shows.

Now Major Watson, our element leader, cut hard to right. As our wing dipped low, I looked square on the deck of a corvette not fifty feet away. Pandemonium had broken loose. Sailors were running up and down the slippery boards, falling flat on their faces, scrambling and diving over the rails to the safety of the water below. We levelled again. Ahead, not a mile away, lay



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the vast camp area, its docks and warehouses, its trucks and roads, its barracks, tents, and mess halls.

"Bomb doors open," screamed a voice. It was mine.

Right beneath our nose and pointed in our direction, trying to get up and into the fight, a Japanese Zero plane rushed along the water, leaving the wake of its own pontoon. Mac dipped slightly downward, and sighted his guns. "Christ," he screamed, "they're jammed." What nerve that plucky Jap had against such odds! Rising from the water beneath us, he pulled up into a loop, Immelmanned, and for an instant sat smack on our tail! At the same time, and from seemingly nowhere, dashed a P-38. Ambrose! His four .50 caliber machine guns and one 20 mm. cannon, in deadly concentration, trained on the Zero. The Jap fired; we lost an aileron. The P-38 fired, and the Jap crumpled, burst into flames, and fell to the water.

"Bombs away," sang out Bernard Dowd, our bombardier. We were only twenty feet off the ground now, directly above the camp area. Under the tail of the lead-ship I could see the bombs fall, then strike. As if by magic, the whole area suddenly became a sea of deep, red flame. Soldiers standing near their tents, firing at us with rifles, vanished. A one-hundred-pound gasoline and rubber charge crashed through the roof of a large wooden barracks, and blew out the sides. A lone gun-

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ner on a nearby hill opened fire. Our turret replied. He fell over his gun.

We flew low through a valley, here and there pulling up and turning to dodge small hills. We came to the sea again on the west side of the island. I lit a cigarette and looked at my watch—nine forty-three and one-half A.M.! Just three and one-half minutes from the time the first shot was fired. Rejoining our formation, we counted heads. Bombers—all present. Fighters—two missing. . . .

We turned eastward and headed for home.

## 2

Here is a bombardier's own story of his first operational flight against the Japanese in the Aleutians. It describes an attack on two Japanese destroyers of the Hibiki Class on October 16, 1942, near Kiska Island. Technical Sergeant L. O. Gardner was bombardier in a B-26 that participated in the attack. This is how it looked through a Marauder's glass nose, written by the man whose sensitive fingers control that all-important bomb-release which spells the success or failure of a mission. . . .

# THREE STORIES

## II

### BAPTISM OF FIRE

By L. O. Gardner  
Tech. Sgt., A. C.

October 16 was apparently just another day, except the perpetually dismal Aleutian weather had lifted and Old Man Sol revealed his cheerful face, a phenomenal occurrence.

I casually glanced at my watch. The afternoon was just about over. I wondered what my wife was doing. I noted that several of our ships were warming up at the end of the runway. Lieutenant Hellesvig, one of our navigators, walked by.

"Lieutenant, do you suppose my ship will go on any of these missions soon?" I asked.

He glanced at a slip of paper in his hand, hesitated.

"Why, yes," he said, "You'd better hurry over there. I think you're going on this mission."

My heart jumped. I swung around and started running for the end of the runway. Just then I noticed a "jeep" speeding in my direction, purposefully. It got to me, swung around and one of the boys on it yelled: "Hop on, quick! You're on this mission."

I jumped on and we headed for the plane. The jeep slowed down, swerved, and I jumped off and started running for the ladder.

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Lieutenant Maurer, the pilot, with a grin, said, "I knew you were around here somewhere," and turned back to the controls.

He started the engines up. We heard two other ships roar by on the take-off. We taxied to the end of the line, waiting our turn for take-off. I set the navigator's altimeter. I noted that my fellow crew members were Staff Sergeant "Baldy" Hanson and Corporal "Red" Melvin respectively, radio operator and gunner.

Lieutenant Maurer revved the engines up. We started moving, swung around, and suddenly we were thundering down the runway for take-off.

We quickly gained an altitude of 500 feet, circled the field and slid into formation with the other airplanes. By that time, we were rounding the mountain on the north end of the island, and we started to look after our guns and equipment.

I opened the bulkhead door between the navigator's compartment and bomb bay and squeezed my way to the rear of the bombs. Anxiously, I checked over shackles, arming wires, electrical connections. Satisfied I pulled the pins that would render the bombs "Messengers of Destruction."

I crawled back through the bulkhead door and reported everything O.K. to the pilot. He nodded to me to go forward into the nose.

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I crawled past the co-pilot, Lieutenant Nielsen, and slid between the rudder pedals and into my seat.

Turning on my indicator switch, I glanced at the panel to see that all bomb stations were lit. Everything satisfactory, I slipped on my headset, called the pilot on interphone and requested permission to test fire my machine gun. I loaded and checked the gun and fired a five-round burst.

Lieutenant Maurer called me, "Gardner, do you know anything about this mission, or what we're supposed to do?"

"No, sir."

"Come on up here where I can talk to you and I'll explain as much as I can."

I crawled out of my cubby hole, between the pilot and co-pilot, then turned around. Lieutenant Maurer explained the mission and illustrated our plan with a sketch.

"We'll be there in approximately forty-five minutes," he said.

"I understand now, Lieutenant," I said. "Any further instructions?"

"Yes," the pilot said. "There's a rock just off this island ahead. Let's make a run on it and drop one of our bombs to get 'warmed up' and test the bomb racks."

I crawled back into the bombardier's compartment,

## SHORT CUT TO TOKYO

opened the bomb doors and waited for the red light to go on, so I could put the control lever into "Selective." The target came up. I toggled off one bomb and leaned forward so I could follow it down. I saw a brown streamlined shape fall away from us and plunge into the water just short of the target. Closing the bomb doors, I called the pilot.

"Everything O.K., sir. Just short of the target."

The flight continued. We maintained a rather large echelon formation. We passed the island of Amchitka.

I thought, "Oh, oh! I'd better keep my eyes open around here."

I checked everything over again. My heart beat a little faster. I felt warm. I kept wondering if I was going to be afraid.

The atmosphere had a peculiar leaden gray hue, though visibility was good. The sky had a high overcast and the water was a dull gray color. We ran into scattered showers, very small.

The pilot spoke, "We're almost there."

To our front, in the far distance, I saw a group of three airplanes. I wondered if they were friendly or enemy.

We came close enough to see they were the other flight. Our formations joined. We could see Kiska Island, very obscured by mist.

My left hand froze on the bomb door control, my

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right on the gun. I started breathing faster. "Gee, I must be scared," I thought.

We turned left, flew for quite a distance in a large circle to the right. The formation circled, started back the opposite way.

Suddenly, on the far horizon—two ships!

The pilot called, "Everybody ready?" The crew answered, one at a time, in tense voices, "Ready, sir."

The formation turned to the left and broke into two groups of three, then spread out. We got closer and closer, started circling, like a tribe of Comanche Indians closing in on a wagon train.

Suddenly, sheet lightning darted away from the dark, formidable, gray shapes in the distance. Water spouted on our right. Dirty looking balls of black smoke suddenly appeared on our right front, in ever-increasing numbers.

My heart was pounding furiously, my breath was coming hard. I felt hard and tensed up in every muscle. My right hand froze to my nose gun.

We turned around, putting our formation in the lead, and started circling in the opposite direction. The pilot called:

"Everybody ready! This is it! Good luck and give 'em hell!"

The turret gunner: "Good luck, everybody. Give 'em hell!"

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The tail gunner: "Good luck, everybody!"

More and more of those deadly looking puffs of black smoke appeared, much too close for our peace of mind. Great flashes continued to dart from the ships.

Our formation wheeled to the left, started to close in, weaving and bobbing like boxers in an arena, continually changing speed, course, altitude.

I opened the bomb doors. I struggled to turn my head away from the scene long enough to see the bomb door light.

The light went on. I shoved the control lever into "Selective."

Varying our altitude from fifteen to fifty feet, dodging, bobbing, skidding, we closed in like a pack of hungry wolves.

We were the right wing ship of the lead formation. Captain Salter's plane was in front of us and to our left. While firing into the deck of the smaller destroyer, I saw his plane, like a monstrous black bird, rise over the stern of the destroyer to our left and sow bombs like planting corn, right up the center of the ship from stern to bow. The superstructure started to explode violently, erupting flame.

We were almost on our target. I ran out of ammunition. Suddenly the other destroyer loomed up in my face. Quickly, I called the pilot—"Hold it!" I toggled three times. "Bombs away! Let's get out of here!"



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I leaned over and followed the bombs down. The first hit just forward of the stern, at the water line, and the other hit further forward, on top of the deck. I could only see two bombs hit. Closing the bomb bay, I glanced at the indicator lights. Three bombs left! I called the gunner.

"Melvin, take a look at those bombs and see what's wrong. I only dropped two."

"Roger," he answered.

The pilot called, "Everybody O.K.?"

"Gardner, O.K."

"Hanson, O.K."

"Where's Melvin?"

"He's in the bomb bay, checking the bombs, sir. We only dropped two!"

Melvin called, "Gardner, they look O.K. to me."

"Roger," I answered.

We swung out and away. I looked around the horizon. The first of the two destroyers to be hit was shooting huge spouts of flame and smoke. An explosion occurred almost every ten seconds. We started carrying on a joyous, if somewhat profane, conversation over the interphone.

I looked at the second ship. It was wallowing in the ground swell, stern low in the water. Black smoke was pouring from its stern.

We cruised around the remains of the two ships.

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Obviously one was sinking rapidly, the other severely damaged.

I could only see three other planes in the air beside ours. I called Melvin.

"Melvin did they get two of our planes?"

"They got one," he answered, "I saw it go down."

"Damn!"

Lieutenant Maurer called, "Gardner, get ready. We're going to make another run and get rid of these three bombs." We turned, started coming in again. I had reloaded my gun and had another ammo can ready. I glanced at the remaining destroyer and saw they were firing at us with the big guns from the forward turrets. Smoke continued to pour from the stern.

We swung around and headed straight for the bow of the ship, maintaining evasive action. Puffs of smoke kept appearing in our vicinity, even closer.

We had come within shooting range of the ship. I fired my nose gun, following the tracer into the fore-deck of the target.

I opened the bomb doors, maintaining fire with my right hand. The ammunition ran out. Quickly, I swung my gun over, yanked out the empty can and shoved another into place. I pushed the control lever into "Selective." I fed ammunition into the feedway of the gun, slammed the cover down and started shooting again. By this time, we were almost at the ship.

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I grabbed the gun with my left hand, dropped my right hand to the toggle switch. The pilot straightened out and I toggled about ten times, still firing. The ammunition ran out again, just as we passed over the bow of the destroyer. Horrified, I saw tracers and "pom-pom" coming at us. We had to climb quickly to avoid ramming the mast. I saw a gaping hole in the stern, smoke pouring out. I yanked the bomb doors closed. The aft guns were not firing.

There was a trail of tiny figures in the water, a few clinging to wreckage. In the distance, against a murky gray sky, dense black smoke and pillars of flame erupted from the remains of the first destroyer.

I glanced at the indicator lights. My heart sank! There were still three bombs left. I notified the pilot.

We circled the vicinity a little while longer. One other plane was still with us. We started home, the plane undamaged.

We came in over the field at dusk, circled, and landed. We taxied over to the other planes and parked.

I jumped out of the plane, bent over and patted the ground, my knees still weak from excitement. It was sure good to be alive.

In the years to come, I'll think back to the scene of that battle; I'll remember the most perfect bombing run I ever saw, actual or practice. Captain Salter and Lieutenant Patillo and their crew deserve a great deal of

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credit for the remarkable attack they made on that destroyer.

I'll remember that some of this organization's finest men went down that day and the mission before that, their lives lost in an effort to stamp out the most verminous species to ever inhabit our earth.

I'll remember that I'm living on borrowed time. The extension was granted to me by the skill of my pilot, Lieutenant Maurer, whose excellent flying brought the entire crew out without a scratch.

### 3

Bombers and fighters perform a hazardous job; but their hazards would be even greater were it not for the work of the rescue-ship. This mercy-plane accompanies a bombing-mission whenever it sets out for the target, prepared to dive through enemy fire to pick up a pilot who has parachuted into the water, or to brave the anti-aircraft and Zeros in order to save the crew of a fallen bomber. Its job is hazardous, too. The morning that I was to leave the Aleutians for the States, Lieutenant Flint stayed back at the base—it was the first time he had not piloted the rescue-ship in months—in order to finish this article so I might take it with me. He

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turned over the controls of the rescue-ship for that one morning to his co-pilot. Seven Zeros jumped the ship from the clouds that morning, strafed it on the water, set it afire. It was never heard from again. . . .

### III

#### MERCY PILOT

By Knute Flint  
Lieutenant, A. C.

We have set out an hour ahead of the rest of the squadron—our plane isn't built for speed—on a bombing-mission over Kiska. The heavy clouds hang low over the Pacific. They are beautiful in the pink dawn; but that isn't why we are interested in them right now. Those clouds, you see, offer us our only really effective escape from a fast-flying Jap Zero. We are flying westward along the Aleutian chain, heading for Kiska; the air is unusually clear for the islands, and it seems as though you could reach out and touch the smudgy flanks of a volcano on your left, fifteen miles away. Everything from the lazy rivers of frozen lava at the bottom to the clock-like puffs from the crater at the top stands out against the gray-green of the Bering-Pacific. You see a school of hair seals ahead and dive down, giving them a buzz. Off to one side a large, long black hulk appears

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suddenly in the water. A Jap sub! Pouring the coal to the ship, we get almost within gunfire range before we realize it is a whale, and a dead one at that. We can see its ugly enormous belly, rolling sluggishly with the heavy swells as we pass over.

We are getting closer to Kiska every minute and we stay low to blank out enemy detectors. Ted, the other pilot, has the yoke, so I unsnap my safety belt, take off my headset and climb down from the pilots' compartment. We don't wear 'chutes because we fly so low all the time there'd be no chance to use them. Besides, bailing out over water as deathly cold as the water we were skimming over is no solution. The radio operator is trying to pick up any stray Zeros in that area before we can see them. Nobody admits it, but you feel a little like a lone duck flying over a target range. We are almost to our point of interception, and we haven't sighted the rest of the squadron yet. It give you a sort of sore thumb feeling, being out there very much alone, a clay pigeon for a Zero. The interphone crackles abruptly: "Gunner to pilot."

"Go ahead."

"Ships coming in low from the six o'clock position, sir."

Ted jams prop and throttle forward and I head for the nearest clouds. After all, enemy ships had been reported all over the area. Watching that group of black

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dots closing on us, fast, we wish the clouds were a little closer together.

After what seems to be an endless moment, we make out the familiar outlines of our ships, and we grin at each other a little weakly, and drop back down, just off the water. Our throttles are bent all the way but still they walk by us, sleek mediums pulling by first, on our right. They are close enough now so that we can see them flipping a hand in greeting, and here and there we make out a face we know. Then the heavies, ponderous but fast, bore past on the left. The peashooters are all around, like a swarm of hornets. Impudently, one of them flies between our wing and the water. We are infected by the same mounting excitement that they feel, the same tenseness, the same determination. We're all heading for the target together. This is our show, too. . . .

For I fly a rescue-ship; and my job is to go out, whenever a fighter-plane or bomber is forced down by enemy action or weather, and pick up the members of the combat-crew, and bring them safely home. They do the strafing and bombing, but in modern warfare the rescue-ship also plays a vital rôle: part of the Air Forces' efforts for maximum possible efficiency and safety. And in these barren and uninhabited islands, our job is a unique one.

Rescue-problems here in the Aleutians are very

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different from the work in the interior of Alaska. To be sure, there are no vast snow fields to cope with, no tremendous ice floes; but worse than either of these, for a plane, is the Aleutian weather. In one of the passes we fly over, waves up to sixty feet from trough to crest have been recorded. There are few protected coves or harbors; and in some of these, when the wind is right, williwaws occur which can knock a plane down into the water. All these demands upon a rescue-ship call for a ruggedly-built long-range flying boat. A plane which can land in heavy seas, stay in heavy seas without breaking up, and take-off with a load—in heavy seas. A plane which has actual living quarters for a crew, which can land in a bay and stay there for several weeks if necessary. And, besides this—a plane which can land on a short runway, on land. The only ship to fulfill these requirements has been the Catalina, called the OA-10 by the Army, the PBY-5A by the Navy. The Bismarck was tracked down by the seaplane sister of this ship and our Navy and the British use them for patrolling. This is the ship we fly.

Through experience, the Army has learned how to cope with problems of rescue peculiar to Alaska. An officer was lost on a flight out of Fairbanks in an experimental transport plane last winter. His approximate position was determined, and a hundred-mile circle was searched in vain around this point. The circle was



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increased to two hundred and still there was no sign. On their return to the field late one afternoon, after a fruitless search, they found him—in the pilots' lounge. He had seen them flying around several times but he couldn't signal them because there was nothing to burn, his plane was camouflaged white in order to blend with the snow, and he was too small to be seen. It was a trapper who picked him up, took him to the railroad, and brought him back to Fairbanks.

From that incident, the Air Corps learned to camouflage only the top half of the plane white. The underside of the plane and the wings are painted a bright Chinese red so that if a crack-up occurs, parts of the ship will stand out clear. They even provide tools to turn the wings over should the pilot be able to bring the ship down intact. Besides that, chemicals were provided to create a heavy, black smoke. Then, of course, all pilots are equipped with emergency rations, fishing gear, a good knife, a .45 caliber pistol, a small combination shotgun and rifle for game, compass and a waterproof case of matches. All pilots are given an opportunity to learn methods of living off the country by actual classroom discussions led by grizzled old sourdoughs, men who have lived in the uncharted parts of Alaska for years.

In my own Aleutian work, for example, I picked up a little trick from one of them, which may save my life

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someday. He told me to look closely along the shores of an island, until I saw a green, slimy gob of gelatinous material. The green outer covering may be stripped off, and underneath will be found what he called sea-eggs; thousands of fish eggs. The Aleutian blue fox grows fat on them. They're relatively tasteless, but they can be lived on. After a few months of Army rations, they're even a bit of a delicacy.

To solve some of the Alaskan rescue problems, special planes are needed. In a routine, late-afternoon flight out of Anchorage, three peashooters ran into trouble: weather, as usual. One of the ships iced up so badly that it went into an uncontrollable spin, and the pilot had to bail out. Unfortunately, they were over a large arm of the ocean, in the winter. He managed to spill his chute over an ice floe but he didn't notice, till later, that the floe wasn't part of the main ice pack. This became increasingly obvious during the night—it had been too late to get him that afternoon—as the floe was slowly breaking up. By morning the floe was so small that the ordinary plane couldn't land on it, all the surface boats were ice-bound and there was too much loose ice in the water for a seaplane.

Fortunately, back at the base, they had a new plane with a very slow landing-speed. It was decided to attempt a landing on the floe with this plane, on wheels. From then on, everything went smoothly. There was

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about a twenty-mile wind and the plane landed, rolled a few feet and stopped. One of the pilots was left there to be gotten later, while the peashooter pilot was taken off immediately. Today the Air Corps has planes like these covering most of Alaska.

Our main job is to act as rescue-ship for any of our planes which might be shot down in raids over Kiska. If a ship is hit without destroying crew or plane, but is disabled so that it immediately begins losing altitude, the pilot tries to get as far as possible from the enemy coastal batteries. That's where we come in. While the peashooters give the shore guns hell, to keep them busy, we try to land as close as we can to the crashed plane. Our gunners are trained to use life-preservers, rafts and ropes in order to get the crew of the wrecked plane into our boat quickly, so that we can take off again before the enemy spots us. . . .

We are the first out and the last in. It's a long day on one of these raids. But we're amply repaid by knowing how good we look to the rest of our gang, flying over the cold and deep ocean as they head into combat.

## 5. Landbridge

The Aleutians have always been a link between two worlds. Over this ancient landbridge, civilization flowed once in a vast migration across the Pacific: our North American Indians, even the Aztecs and the Incas of Peru, may be the descendants of nomadic tribes from Asia who travelled across the Aleutians to the mainland of America. The Japs are merely repeating an age-old pattern of history.

It is a history of violence and conquest. Once tens of thousands of proud fierce natives inhabited the beaches and grassy lowlands of the islands, hunting whales and seals and the now-extinct sea-cow, dwelling in sod-covered *barabaras* with giant whale-ribs for rafters, making their clothes of the priceless fur of the sea-otter. Over and over, invading hordes from Kamchatka and the Kuriles would descend upon the chain in their skin *bidarkas*, slaughtering the inhabitants, burning their villages. Refugees from Asiatic wars fled to the islands—the Aleuts themselves are probably descendants of the tribe of Hairy Anus, original inhabitants of the Island of Nippon, driven from their homeland by swart barbarians from the south known as the Japanese—and built new homes on the smoking ashes

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of the old. New civilizations flourished and were wiped out in turn. Beneath the long-obliterated Aleut village sites, overgrown with rye-grass today or buried beneath the debris of a volcanic eruption, can be found the traces of these earlier cultures, layer on successive layer, piled one above another like the volumes in a set of history. Now and then Army engineers, excavating for a mess-hall or storage-building, dig unexpectedly into the refuse-heap of a prehistoric kitchen-midden; amid the clutter of shells and fishbones and charred sections of whale vertebrae they overturn broken bits of pottery, beads, stone hatchets, wooden dolls, occasionally a beautifully carved ivory labret worn once as an ornament through the pierced cheek of some prehistoric belle. Last year a group of enlisted men, burying a powder-magazine in the hillside behind Dutch Harbor, were somewhat shaken to uncover twenty-seven skeletons, seated in a grim and silent circle around the rim of the hole.

Mostly the early tribes buried their warrior-dead in the labyrinthine vaults and caves that honeycomb the bases of the volcanoes. The bodies were carefully eviscerated, stuffed with wild rye—*elymus*—and placed in a sitting position, with the knees drawn up under the chin, the hands clasped, the head bent forward in an attitude of brooding thought. The natural heat of the mountain dried and preserved the mummies in their

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timeless reveries; landslides and geologic disturbances sealed the entrances of the caves, and locked their secrets away forever. How this practice of mummification started is not known. According to Dr. Ales Hrdlicka, curator of anthropology of the Smithsonian Institution, who has made extensive excavations in the islands, the art was developed in only two widely separated places in America: the Aleutians and Peru. It is not impossible, Doctor Hrdlicka admits, that there is a connection between the two. Perhaps the original secret was brought by wanderers from Egypt, over the Aleutian bridge to Alaska, and down the west coast of the Americas all the way to Peru.

It was an expedition of the Alaska Game Commission, making a survey of wild-life in the islands just before the war, that discovered quite by accident the largest collection of mummies in the Aleutians. The party had been gathering bird-specimens on Kagamil Island in the Four Mountain Group, a little west of Umnak; and as they were returning to their ship along the rugged south shore of the Island, their attention was attracted by a female blue fox yapping at them from a cave some fifty yards above the water. They marked the cave by a live fumarole, which was sending a steady jet of steam through a fissure in the rocks beside it; and laboriously they climbed the loose mass of tumbled boulders to the entrance, a V-shaped orifice in the cliff.

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The fumarole was steaming noisily just to their right; above its sulphurous fumes they detected a strange decadent smell issuing from the mouth of the cave. The fox had fled, but the object on which it had been chewing lay at their feet. They looked closer. It was a section of human arm.

Holding their breath—the mouth of the cave was very narrow—they wriggled and squeezed feet-first into the vault. The interior of the cave was dark; the ceiling was so low they could not stand upright inside, and it was caked with a hard white salt-like deposit. The floor was littered with rubble, loose rocks, pieces of bone, the scat of numerous foxes, all of it covered with a fine fluffy brown dust, as soft as lint, which rose around their boots as they scuffed it. The cave was uncomfortably warm, heated by the streams of lava flowing just underneath—the dirt in places was actually too hot to handle—and the overpowering dank smell gagged them as they breathed.

In single file they began to creep forward on their hands and knees, clinging for guidance to the dirt wall of the cave. Abruptly the leader halted, with a little yelp of fright. A hand had reached out from the wall and raked its fingers across his cheek. He struck a match. Before him, in the flickering light, he could see the withered arm of a mummy protruding from the dirt. Evidently it had been dug partly out of its earthly tomb

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by the ravenous foxes; the exposed portion of its leathery face had been eaten away, but the part still buried was intact.

The match went out; some one in the party struck a second with unsteady fingers. Beyond them they could see another brown sunken face, and still another, grinning at them mirthlessly. The sides of the cave were literally lined with mummies. Once they had been arranged in tiers, one upon another, supported by racks of driftwood; most of them had been pawed out and violated by foxes, and one or two had been dragged bodily onto the floor of the cave. They were in various stages of preservation, and apparently of all ages: adult males and females, children, even a premature birth in a basket of pleated grass. Each body had been elaborately clothed in sea-otter fur or bird-skin parkas, wrapped in sea-lion skins, and laced together with ropes of twisted kelp. They still wore ivory ornaments around their necks and in their cheeks; one wrinkled monkey-face even had a jaunty feather stuck through the dry lobe of his left ear.

The floor of the cave was littered with crude artifacts, grass matting, shreds of woven mummy-wrapping, bones, trinkets. Part of an ancient skin-kayak, evidently buried with its owner, lay on its side; paddles, war-shields, stone-lamps, exquisite grass-baskets were spilled around it in the dust. Still buried in the wall



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was a carved wooden dish filled with the dried wings of birds, probably a funeral offering; an ornithologist in the party identified the feathers of the pine-grosbeak. A solitary skull lay in a wicker-basket lined with moss, like an Easter egg; the top of the head had been neatly split by an axe. Even in those days, it seems, the Aleutians were a battlefield.

I saw some of the specimens recently in the Smithsonian Museum in Washington. The old boy with the feather in his ear grinned at me familiarly from his glass case; beside him hung a shrunk Jivaro head from Peru, a bird-feather thrust likewise through his left ear lobe—further evidence of the possible link between these remote American cultures. Only a few mummies were on exhibit; the rest, Doctor Hrdlicka explained, had been stored somewhere in the cellar of the museum, and he was not quite sure where they were. It had taken two thousand years to find them in the Aleutians, he remarked sadly; it would take even longer to find them again in the Smithsonian basement. . . .

The discovery of the Aleutians by Russia, in 1741, began a new and even more violent chapter in the island's bloody history. The ill-fated expedition under Commander Vitus Bering had set sail that summer from Avatcha Bay in two ships, the *St. Peter* under Bering himself and the *St. Paul* under Captain Alexei Chirikov. They became separated in the north Pacific

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fog; actually it was Chirikov who first sighted the islands, on his way homeward after a brief and tragic contact with the Alaska mainland. More than half his ship's company, indiscreetly venturing ashore in small boats near Prince William Sound, had been set upon and massacred by savages; undermanned, ill with scurvy, their provisions and water running low, the remainder of the crew were returning miserably to Kamchatka. On the 4th of September, in latitude  $52^{\circ}30'$ , Chirikov's journal notes the presence of some high land in a northerly direction: probably the island of Unalaska. It was the first time the Aleutians had ever been seen by a white man. Two days later, westing with a favorable wind, land was again sighted in latitude  $51^{\circ}30'$ ; it proved to be Adak Island. They anchored with difficulty on the hard rocky bottom, and the following morning when the fog lifted they found themselves in a shallow cliff-lined harbor, evidently the Bay of Waterfalls. The mountains were barren, Chirikov writes, with here and there small patches of moss or grass, but no trees. While awaiting a favorable wind in order to leave this inhospitable-looking port—it is no more hospitable today—they saw seven savages coming towards them in skin-kayaks, chanting an incantation. "These men seemed to be of fair size and resembled the Tatars," Chirikov's journal records. "They were pale and seemingly healthy. All of them

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were beardless, whether naturally so or because they pluck out the hair it is hard to tell. They stuff roots into their noses which causes them to bleed. On their heads they wear a kind of hat made of thin birch boards, which are decorated with various colors and feathers. Some of these hats had in the top small ivory statues. As a mark of friendship we offered them a copper kettle, which they kept for a little while and then handed back."

Evidently the natives took a rather dim view of the Russian gifts. "I tossed them a Chinese cup," Chirikov continues, "but they threw it in the water. I then gave them small boxes, bells, needles, Chinese tobacco, pipes, all of which they received indifferently as if not knowing what to do with them. They did not even know that needles would sink when they fell in the water, and instead of saving them they merely watched them go down. Among them we noticed several who raised one hand to the mouth and with the other hand made a quick motion as if cutting something. This gave us the idea that they wanted knives, because Kamchadals and other people of this region when they eat meat cut it at the mouth." Knives were offered, and eagerly hailed; but the Russians, anxious for drinking water, decided to drive a bargain. By gestures they indicated that they would exchange a knife for a bladder of water. The results of this first trade between white men

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and natives ended distinctly in favor of the natives. "The first man took the knife," Chirikov records, "but instead of handing over the bladder of water, he passed it to the second man, who also demanded a knife. When he got it, he passed the bladder to the third man, and so on down the line. This act," he concludes plaintively, "proves that their conscience is not highly developed."

On September 21st, travelling westward, the Russians sighted the southeastern point of Agattu Island; the same afternoon his journal reports snow-covered mountains northeast by north, doubtless the high land of Attu. He did not seek to land. A month later, the sister-ship of the expedition under Commander Bering likewise touched the islands on its homeward course. Their contact with the natives was equally unfortunate. Landing on the Shumagins for water, they had almost succeeded in making friends with the savages when Lieutenant Waxel, anxious to cement the fraternal bonds, offered the chief the most precious thing he had: a drink of brandy. The chief immediately spat it out, crying to his people that he had been poisoned. All Waxel's efforts to quiet him were unavailing; needles, glass beads, an iron kettle, tobacco and pipes were showered on him in vain; finally the Russians were forced to run to their moored boat. The angered natives seized the rope. In a desperate effort to save themselves, two mus-

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kets were fired, and two savages fell to the ground. The report of gunfire, echoing for the first time from the Aleutian cliffs, ushered in an era of slaughter that lasted for almost two centuries.

Bering sailed hastily westward, without attempting to stop again. On October 25th, his log records, land was sighted in latitude  $51^{\circ}$ , and named St. Makarius. This was the island of Amchitka. On the 28th, another island in latitude  $52^{\circ}$  was discovered and named St. Stephen; it was Kiska. Two weeks later, the *St. Peter* piled up on the rocky shores of the Komandorski Islands, named after Commander Bering who died there; but a remnant of the ship's crew, under the famed naturalist Steller, managed to reach Petropavlovsk in a crude boat constructed of pieces from the wreck. Their boat was overcrowded; nevertheless they found room for a few choice sea-otter furs they had taken from the islands.

The appearance of these priceless furs, and the stories of vast herds of the rare animals in the bays and inlets of the Aleutians, was the signal for the bloodiest fur-stampede in history. In the quest for this coveted animal, untold ships were wrecked, thousands of men slain, ruthless warfare waged along the American coast from Alaska to Mexico. The entire race of Aleuts were virtually wiped out of existence in the space of a few decades. *Promyshleniki*—the early Russian fur-traders—

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descended on the islands in hastily-built vessels, trading with the natives when they could, looting and killing when they failed. As the numbers of the *promyshleniki* increased, their outrages mounted. Quarrels with the islanders were wilfully provoked, the entire fur cache of a village was confiscated as penalty, all the men were gathered up and shot to avenge the alleged killing of a white man: another pattern of history that is repeating itself today. The early traders even made a sort of game of it: their diaries describe how they would line the naked Aleuts single-file, and fire a musket point-blank at the chest of the first man. Their best recorded score was nine; the bullet lodged in the chest of the tenth man in line. The women of the village were seized, under the pretext that they were needed to gather berries and roots for the ship's company, kept aboard until the traders were ready to leave the islands, then casually tossed into the ocean as the crew sailed for home.

Even the purchase of Alaska from Russia by the United States did not help the beleaguered Aleuts. In vain, our government sought to restrict otter-hunting to the natives. White men promptly married the Aleut women in order to get around the law. "Hunters, tempted by the great value of the skins," reads a government report written in 1884, "come here to marry the simple native girls, force them to accompany them

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on their hunting-trips, to do their cooking for them, and to work for them. They bring two or three children into the world, then leave their families to get their living as best they can, while the hunters return to enjoy their earnings with their white wives back in civilization."

In 1911, an International Treaty signed by the United States, Great Britain, Russia and Japan put a tardy end to the slaughter. It was too late. The Aleuts, like the sea-otter, were almost extinct. Persecuted for more than a century, ravaged by tuberculosis and influenza, only a handful of natives were left in the islands that bear their name. These few remaining Aleuts depended for their livelihood on trapping the foxes stranded on the islands, and selling their pelts to white traders in exchange for salt, flour, clothing and other goods. Each summer a Coast Guard cutter travelled the length of the lonely chain, giving medical and dental aid, bringing needed supplies, administering justice, even performing marriages on shipboard. For two decades, unheralded and unknown save to a few grateful natives, these bearded young sailors of the United States Coast Guard braved ice storms, hurricanes and mountainous seas, in order to carry out their routine tasks of rescue and mercy. Their experience in the islands is paying dividends today. The safe conveying of troops and supplies to our Aleutian outposts is due

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in large part to the tough tanned weatherwise skippers and crews of our Bering Sea Patrol.

In 1913, by executive order, the majority of the now-deserted islands were set aside as a federal bird-sanctuary, to be administered by the Bureau of Biological Survey, now the Fish and Wildlife Service. Annually the Alaska Game Commission's stout, squat, heavy-timbered *Brown Bear* made a survey of the islands; and one summer, just before the war, I travelled with the Brownie on a leisurely trip to the chain's westernmost tip. I was working with Alastair MacBain on an article on the sea-otter for *Colliers Magazine*; for a couple of months we wandered and slipped and slogged through the swamps and tundra of islands which were destined to be in the headlines only a short time later. We visited Umnak and Atka and Adak; we anchored in Constantine Harbor and crossed to the north shore of Amchitka Island, site of a big otter concentration; we made a long and singularly uneventful tour of Kiska Island, climbing the scaling sides of the volcano, ploughing up to our hips in the bog of Salmon Lagoon. "Kiska is a wasteland of tumbled volcanic slag and boulders," my casual diary reads, "overgrown with rank vegetation that resembles, at a distance, green mold. Near Salmon Lagoon we found two trappers' cabins, bleak and dirty, a homemade mandolin made of a cigar-box and wire the only human



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touch." I have tried vainly since to locate these two cabins amid the Jap installations that cover the area today. "High fluted cliffs come down to the sea, and white breakers crash on the empty resounding shores . . ."

The shores of Kiska seemed so silent and remote that summer; it would have been hard to imagine a landing-party of troops running their boat through the breakers, dodging a rain of bullets as they fought from rock to rock along the sand, dying to establish a beachhead at the base of those hostile cliffs.

## 6. *Mummies, Volcanoes, Sea-Otters*

Years ago, when I was very young, I crossed the Pacific from Vancouver to Japan; and one day, as our ship rounded the top of the great circle, I noticed a string of strange bare mountains rising out of the sea along the northern horizon. They resembled heaps of smoking slag; the sun, striking their sides, gave them a greenish cast like verdigris on copper. I asked a fellow-passenger on deck what they were. "Illusions," I thought he said; but now I realize he said they were the Aleutians. . . .

They were still illusions when I saw the islands for the second time, sailing westward on the *Brown Bear* that summer before the war. Their weird shapes loomed witchlike out of the mist, their headlands and rocky promontories boiled with surf, their cliffs were spattered with the lime of a million sea-birds and honeycombed with caves by the ceaseless action of the waves. Sometimes a half-submerged reef would bare its white teeth for a moment in the swells; sometimes, when the *Brown Bear* entered a fog-bound bay, a number of curious mushroom-shaped rocks would appear silently on all sides of us, like a troop of solemn goblins come out from shore to inspect this intruder in their solitary domain.

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"Pinnacle rocks," Capt. John Sellevold would mutter darkly. "They don't even show on the charts."

Captain John was a tall grave man, taciturn, friendly in a shy intuitive way. His smile warmed his curt clipped speech. His lean face was a geometry of planes and ridges, with hollow sockets from which his blue eyes peered with a hard brilliance. He would jerk his head now and then, without turning, to indicate a snow-capped peak on the horizon, from which a steady white cloud would bend at an angle like a feather against the sky.

"Kiska Volcano. All these islands are sunken volcanoes. We sail right over the tops of them, half the time."

His blue eyes never left our course. His sixth sense guided us day after day through the narrow channels and past the jagged rocks lurking ahead of us in the fog. Sometimes we could not see the bow of the boat from the bridge; we had to feel our way gingerly, giving a blast every so often on our whistle and judging by its echo how far we were from shore. The best available charts were incomplete, dotted with submerged reefs marked "P.D."—position doubtful—or inscribed with the routine warning: "This position may be two miles off"; some of the bays in which the *Brown Bear* anchored were not on any government chart at all. Here and there a reef or shoals would bear a curious

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name: Martha, Star of Bengal, Oneida. "They were all ships," Captain John said grimly.

I spent much of my time in the pilot-house of the *Brown Bear*, studying the incredible concentrations of wild fowl in the islands. The show of birds in the Aleutians is beyond belief. The water, the land, the skies are constantly stirring with wings. An entire white cliff would suddenly explode before our eyes into a swarm of Pacific kittiwakes, disturbed in their brooding, their white plumage and solid black wingtips blinking like a camera shutter. Murres by the thousands would pitch from their nests on the ledges as the *Brown Bear* approached, to dive into the ocean beside us and, literally flying under water, come up on the other side of the boat and emerge on the wing at full flight. Tiny crested auklets hovered and danced like midges offshore; Pacific fulmars and petrels and glaucous-winged gulls, loveliest of all seagulls, were everywhere in fantastic numbers. Sooty albatross would skim the tops of the combers hour after hour in our wake. Slender-billed shearwaters—the famous mutton-birds of Tasmania and the South Seas, which nest each winter on the rim of the Antarctic ice-pack and perversely migrate north to the Aleutians each summer—would settle and rock easily on the waves on either side of us: endless brown acres of them, mile after solid mile, feeding on the plankton churned up by the tide-

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rips. Now and then a fat worried puffin would scurry across our bows, beating its stubby wings on the water and voiding as it sought to unload ballast and take to the air.

We anchored in Kiska Harbor at noon on August fifteenth; and after lunch we went ashore in a small-boat to look for sea-otter. We headed eastward along the beach, scanning the ocean for signs of life. The going was hard. The sand was littered with round boulders, strands of kelp, the bleached skeletons of sea-birds and fish, occasional bright green glass balls broken loose from Japanese fishing-nets and washed ashore in the endless Pacific storms. A matted line of driftwood marked high water; beyond this was an almost tropical growth of giant rye, the stalks braided by the wind and hopelessly tangled together. We forced our way with difficulty through the lush hot grass. Gradually it began to thin, yielding to a spongy moss underfoot, and we emerged at last onto a green rolling tundra that covered the lower slopes of the mountain: a gay Lilliputian meadow, dotted with dwarfed flowers and shrubs only a few inches high, for all the world like a toy Oriental garden. Higher on the slopes the moss itself thinned, and the shoulders of the mountain emerged, stark, rubble-strewn. At its snow-clad peak, partly obscured by clouds, the jagged

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crater of Kiska Volcano stood majestically against the sky.

Even on the tundra the walking was none too good; the moss oozed under me, and my boots sank clear to the ankle with each step. The treeless slopes were virtually barren of bird or animal life. Once a blue fox sprang up, startled, and loped casually away from us; once I saw a rock-ptarmigan coasting over the tundra and out of sight. We followed the rim of the cliff, overlooking the water. A thousand feet below, the surf broke on the beach with a solemn bell-like note, and a few sea-lions, like bloated wine-sacks, were basking on the sand. I started to clamber over the face of a loose pile of rocks; my boot dislodged a small boulder, and it bounded down and hit another, and that in turn loosened another. Before I realized it, a miniature avalanche had started below me. I scrambled uphill desperately towards solid ground as the torrent of loose rocks poured over the side of the cliff and, a full minute later, struck the ocean with a deep stirring thunder.

The sun was setting; we watched it poise on the horizon for a moment and then slip out of sight like a conjurer's gold coin. A queer chuckling sound caught our ears. We halted and waited. A small dark-bodied bird, with a crested topknot which he carried jauntily like a California quail, marched out from a crevice in the cliff and regarded us owlshly for a moment. Then he fluffed

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his feathers insolently—I could have sworn he shrugged—and walked clear to the end of a projecting rock, and, with wings in full motion, pitched off in a power-dive towards the water. Through my glasses I saw him level off at the bottom of his descent, only a few inches from the surface of the ocean, and shoot out at right angles like a projectile from a gun.

He was followed by another, and then another; each bird in turn stepping out onto a rock and taking off in the same breathtaking leap. Some were crested auklets; some the rarer and absurd-looking least auklets, their big eyes surrounded by a few scattered white bristles like plucked eyebrows. Now the air was full of acrobatic birds, forming in single lines and moving in endless undulating ribbons below us, crisscrossing each other's path, weaving in and out in graceful patterns, alternately dark and light as they turned in the air. Abruptly the show ended. Without warning the ribbons wound upward towards the cliff again, and with a roar like a waterfall the entire flock disintegrated overhead. Hundreds of individual birds dropped like falling leaves and landed all about us. Solemnly they looked at us for a moment, shrugged again, and trudged back into their burrows for the night. . . .

We started out again next morning in a depressing drizzle of rain, this time heading westward. The very character of the island seemed to change: the slopes

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grew more precipitous, and deep gulleys and folds blocked our way. At last we were forced to abandon the green uplands, and make our way perilously down the crumbling cliff to the water's edge. Here the beach was narrow and covered with massive boulders, partly overgrown with grass; we had to hop from rock to rock, over the intervening leads of dark heaving water, frequently slipping and falling on the wet kelp. Swarms of gnats followed us, burning our ears and throat, and the perspiration ran saltily into our eyes.

The substance of the entire cliff was lava, ranging from basalt to a crumbling brownish shale, frequently warm to the touch. The bloodstream of the old mountain still ran hot: steam-jets rose from the black broken rock, little boiling streams moved down the face of the cliff towards the sea, and here and there a sulphurous spring bubbled up between the boulders. The beach was desolate and sinister. Murres, disturbed in their brooding, screamed overhead in the fog; now and then a glaucous-winged gull snatched a downy fledgling murre from its nest and made off with it ravenously. Red-legged oyster-catchers shrilled at me as I passed. Occasionally a fat tufted puffin would take off from shore and pedal industriously in a long futile circle back to the very spot he had started from, his white side-whiskers streaming behind him like a black-frocked English vicar doing his parish rounds on a bicycle.



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I was beginning to feel the utter loneliness of the place. The mist was still falling, clammy and cold; it cut to the bone as we reached the wind-swept point, and crept cautiously in a half-crouching position, keeping out of sight as much as possible behind the ledges. Only the squeal of seagulls and the persistent hush of surf along the black reefs disturbed the silence. Loose volcanic cinders rolled like B B shot underfoot; our very footprints were obliterated as though we were walking in water. Ahead of me, Wildlife Agent Douglas Gray ducked suddenly, and held up his hand: "There. In front of you."

All I could see was the ocean and the long sleek ropes of kelp, moving up and down gently as the Pacific swells rolled towards us and flattened, hissing, on the slanting sand. And then I made out something else: first a tiny speck, then a larger speck, then clearly the head of an animal moving towards me through the kelp. Slowly, at an even pace, the otter came nearer, swimming on its back: a strange habit of this fabulous animal that is half of the land and half of the sea. For the first time I could see its triangular head, its wizened wise teddy-bear face, the black clover-shaped flippers with which it kicked itself past the rocks where we lay hidden. On its chest, cradled in its forepaws, was a baby otter. The mother rocked it gently as she swam, and kissed it once with a fierce human pride.

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As we watched, she rolled it gently off her chest onto a bed of kelp—"the young ones," Gray whispered, "don't even know how to swim"—and swirled and, with a single powerful kick of her flippers, dove as abruptly as though she had been yanked underwater with a string. She came up a moment later, holding something in her paws.

"Sea-urchin," Gray said. "Their main food."

Holding the spiny shell between her calloused paws, like a squirrel with a nut, she mashed it and spread out the meat on her furry chest. With great delicacy she began to feed portions of the meat to the young otter drifting beside her; he took the bits in his own forepaws and devoured them hungrily. The meal finished, she picked the last particles from her chest and nibbled on them contentedly, like an old man picking crumbs off his vest. A forepaw tossed away the empty pieces of shell, like peanut-husks. The pair drifted in front of us, less than fifty feet away, and we could see her eyes gazing moodily at the gray sky, her body rising and falling gently: for all the world like a matron and her offspring basking in the ocean at Asbury Park. I even saw her cross one black flipper over the other and wriggle the tips luxuriously, as though she had kicked off her bathing-shoes and were working her toes in satisfaction.

Perhaps I moved; perhaps a stray filament of scent

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carried out to her in the fog. Abruptly she stood on end in the water, gopher-like, her neck craning as she stared towards shore; then, with an indignant sniff, she grabbed the young otter in her teeth by the nape of its neck and began to swim rapidly away, huffing and blowing out her moustache. Occasionally she paused, rearing again and shading her eyes with a forepaw as she peered back towards shore. She disappeared in the fog.

Grey had been puttering around at the base of the rocks; he called suddenly: "Look here." I stared at the narrow strip of black sand. A deep triangular wedge had been gouged at the water's edge.

"Boat," he said briefly. "Only a short time ago. . . ."

His voice trailed; I saw that he was gazing at a large dark object, almost submerged in the surf. He stooped and dragged a dead sea-otter up onto the sand. It had been recently shot—there was a bullet-hole through its shoulder—and its beautiful mummy-brown pelt was still in fair condition. We rolled it over onto its back. It lay limp, its forepaws folded on its chest like a human being resigned in death, its shrewd humorous old-man face staring at the sky.

I looked at Gray. "Jap," he shrugged resignedly.

I have wondered since whether these Jap poachers were seeking more than sea-otter as they explored, year

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after year, the foggy bays and inlets of our unknown islands.

All the Aleuts were evacuated to the mainland when the Japs struck; all but the little handful of natives on Attu, that is. The Navy hurriedly moved the rest to Admiralty Island in southeastern Alaska, where they live today in an abandoned herring-cannery at Kootz-na-Hoo (which means "Home of the Bears") and where they blink suspiciously at the towering forests of spruce—most of them had never seen a tree before in their lives—and complain a bit about the heat.

But there were some other Aleutian refugees which could not be removed; for the all-too-aptly named Rat Island Group, where the Japs settled themselves on Kiska, was the breeding-place of the last remaining herd of northern sea-otter on the American continent. Hunted relentlessly for centuries, these otters had sought out what they fondly believed to be the loneliest spot in the world. You wonder what has happened to them now, with their silent harbors invaded overnight by cruisers and subs, with bombs exploding in their kelp-strewn bays, with the roar of planes and thunder of anti-aircraft guns and constant rumble of trackers and trucks shaking the unaccustomed air of their remote hiding-place.

The sea-otter had good reason to hide from man; for

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this bewhiskered Old Man of the Sea happens to be cursed with the rarest and most beautiful and most valuable fur in the world. The last commercial pelt was sold in London in 1911—the year sea-otter hunting was officially banned—for the staggering price of \$1990. Today even the possession of a piece of sea-otter fur is a federal offense. The fur is incredibly thick, even denser than chinchilla; a coat made entirely of sea-otter would be too heavy to wear. The color is a deep ash-brown or brown-black—much darker than the subspecies recently seen off California—and the whole body is star-dusted with light olive-buff guard hairs that increase from the shoulders forward, giving the neck and head and a grizzled silver-gray cast. The fur is equally dense on the belly and back. Unlike almost any other animal except the fur-seal, it is prime the year round. It lies on the otter in soft folds, loosely furled; you can stretch a skin a third again its normal size, and still you cannot force your fingers down through the fur and touch the hide. The natives would put a cased skin on a stretcher and force a wedge into the stretcher and brace both feet against the wall and pull the skin taut with all their strength, but they could never stretch it so the skin would show. It was the quest for this coveted fur, rather than for beaver or timber or gold, that opened up California and our whole Pacific northwest.

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Actually the animal had been declared extinct, along with the heath-hen and the dodo, when the Alaska Game Commission in 1935 discovered a few specimens still lingering in an uncharted Aleutian bay. Its complete life-history is still a mystery. So little is it known that the single specimen in the Smithsonian was discovered recently to have been mounted with the hind legs reversed. So few living persons have observed the true northern otter at close range that the best available description is still the one written by the naturalist Steller when he accompanied Bering on his voyage of discovery two centuries ago.

For the sea-otter is shy: excessively shy. Persecution has sharpened its senses to the needle-point; its sense of smell is perhaps the keenest of any wild animal. They say an otter can scent an intruder a couple of miles away. They feed entirely in the water, diving from sixty to one hundred and fifty feet for their food. Their main diet is sea-urchins, small crustaceans which fasten themselves to the rocks underwater in bright-colored beds like flower gardens, and which protect themselves from enemies by means of sharp spines and the Latin name *Strongylocentrotus drobachiensis*. Only the sea-otter, with its club-like calloused paws, can crack the urchin's spiky armor. The otter also enjoys an occasional shore-dinner of limpets, periwinkles, crabs, surf-fish, seaweed, and small bright-red chitons—tough

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leathery mollusks nicknamed "bidarkas" by the natives because of their boat-like shape. An otter will clamp its teeth on one of these chitons and tug at it with its paws and bite a mouthful out, like a man taking a chew of plug-cut. It feeds with great delicacy—it is a true gourmet—and when it brings up a bottom-fish, usually a flounder, it holds the fish like an ear of corn, takes a mouthful, then places the fish carefully on its chest and revolves the morsel in its mouth with its forepaws. They told us of finding otters with the guard-hairs actually worn down as a result of using the chest for a cafeteria-tray.

The otter sleeps in the kelp, lying on its back with its eyes closed, its big hind-flippers locked together beneath the tail, and the tip of the tail curled up a little, as though to balance the animal in the water. Usually after a full meal it takes a siesta in the surf, wrapping a strand of kelp around its middle to keep it from drifting, and basking in the lazy swells, its forefeet propped under its chin as it stares with a dreamy expression into space.

Even when it is asleep, however, its uncannily sharp senses are aware of the slightest suspicious sound. Once I crept within a hundred feet of a sleeping otter. At the first warning click of my camera, however, it opened its eyes and swung its head around sharply, like an old gentleman surprised in the bath-tub, cast one indignant

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look at me, swirled over to free itself from the strand of kelp, and began to swim rapidly away, muttering to itself and puffing out its moustache.

I saw only one otter out of water. Walking along the beach of Amchitka Island and keeping my glasses trained on every kelp-bed and exposed reef, I made out the contours of an otter asleep on a partially-submerged boulder, a full quarter of a mile from shore. The wind was in my favor, the water was fortunately shoal; cautiously, exploring my way inch by inch with the toe of my boot, I began to ease out through the kelp. Once or twice it lifted its head and sniffed the air suspiciously, staring towards shore and shading its eyes with a fore-paw as though to see me better. At last, when I was only twenty yards away, it rose on all fours.

It was a large otter, somewhere between five and six feet in length, its body heavy and rounded, its neck short, its head blunt with tiny pointed ears almost hidden in the deep grizzled fur. Its front legs were short, the digits on the paws so closely connected that they gave the appearance of doubled-up fists. Its hind feet appeared to be webbed and flattened into broad flippers; its whole rear quarters sagged, as though it were not used to resting its weight on them. Its dark beautiful coat hung in soft folds, shining like satin. It stared at me a full moment, shook itself like a huge Newfoundland dog—I could see the fur rippling loosely on



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its body—snorted impatiently, and half-waddled, half-fell off the boulder into the water. It appeared once more, a hundred yards down wind, and seemed to stand upright for an instant on the surface of the ocean, its hind-quarters dropping as it craned its neck and its nose tested the air for my scent. Then it swirled, and plunged out of sight.

“Altogether it is a beautiful and pleasing animal,” wrote Steller, in 1743, “cunning and amusing in its habits, and at the same time ingratiating and amorous. They prefer to lie together in families, the male with its mate, the half-grown young and the very young sucklings all together. The male caresses the female by stroking her, using the forefeet as hands; she, however, often pushes him away from her for fun and in simulated coyness, as it were, and plays with her offspring like the fondest mother. Their love for their young is so intense that for them they expose themselves to the most manifest danger of death. When their young are taken away from them, they cry bitterly, like a small child, and grieve so much that, as we observed from rather authentic cases, after ten to fourteen days they grow as lean as a skeleton, become sick and feeble, and will not leave the shore.”

When swimming, the mother carries the baby otter on her chest, clasping it between her forepaws. Sometimes a mother carries her offspring under one forearm,

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like a football, or makes a cradle of her uplifted elbows. The parents nurse and pamper the young otter for a couple of years until it is almost fully grown.

Because the babies have to be taught to swim and dive, like human children, the parents usually leave them floating on the surface while they dive for food. Often the mother and baby will play together, the mother fondling and kissing the young one and tossing it in the air proudly. The chief of the village of Attu told me of seeing a mother otter who held her baby on her chest and, as she rocked it back and forth gently, actually crooned a lullaby to it in a soft but audible humming sound.

Sometimes you see the grown otters playing together in pairs, turning cartwheels end-over-end in the water, rolling and splashing, occasionally growling at each other, then separating and drifting apart on their backs with an air of assumed boredom. They seem to enjoy doing stunts in the water. I have watched them through the glasses as they tossed bits of kelp back and forth, evidently in a sort of game, or clapped their forepaws and hind-flippers together, fast and loud, in almost human triumph.

These human traits were its undoing. Unmolested and unafraid—for the otter has almost no natural enemies—the animals formerly would lie on the rocks at low tide, or in the rank grass at high water; and the

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natives would creep up on them and beat them to death with birch poles. The return of the first Alaskan explorers, with their fantastic tales of natives who used the priceless furs to stuff the chinks of their *barabaras* against the cold and who would trade a fortune in pelts for beads or abalone shells, was the signal for the historic slaughter. Natives were hired by the *promishleniki* to scour the seas in their skin-boats and kill the animals by the tens of thousands. Yankee skippers came from as far as Boston to join in the lucrative stampede. Spaniards pressed north out of Mexico along the California coast, gathering skins to send to China in exchange for quicksilver to be used in their Mexican mines. For a third of a century, otter-hunting was the only really important industry along the entire Pacific coast. In 1804, a single ship under Commander Baranof sailed back to Russia with a cargo of 16,000 skins—which would be worth over thirty million dollars today. In San Francisco Bay, boatmen killed the otters with their oars. The toll in this Bay alone reached as high as seven or eight hundred in a week.

Commonest method of hunting otter in the old days was by the "surround" method—circling a swimming otter with a fleet of *bidarkas*, two native hunters to each boat, and forcing the animal to dive until it was exhausted. The sea-otter, being essentially a land-animal, must come to the surface frequently to breathe. "When

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the boats are near enough," runs the vivid account of an early hunt, "the hunters in the bows shoot at the otter with arrows; if they do not hit the animal right away, they force it to dive and do not let it rise without immediately again shooting an arrow at it. From the rising bubbles, they constantly notice in which direction the animal goes; meantime with a pole to which are fastened small crosspieces like a brush they fish up the floating arrows from the water. Finally the exhausted animal becomes so breathless that it cannot stay under water for even a minute. Then they dispatch it with a lance."

The inevitable happened, of course. The vast herds dwindled, faster and faster each year. Within a decade, hunters had effectively removed all of the otter north of San Francisco Bay; a few years later, the northern otter had disappeared entirely from California. By 1830, some seventy-five years after the discovery of the first sea-otter in North America, the species was so nearly extinct that Baron Von Wrangel of the Russian American Company persuaded his government to institute the most rigid conservation measures. The purchase of Alaska by the United States was the final blow. We improved on the native methods of slaughter by substituting powerful long-range rifles for the clumsy spears and arrows. In 1911, the year the International Treaty was signed, a fleet of thirty-one hunting schooners had

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scoured the former hunting-grounds in vain. Their total take for a summer was a dozen skins.

You wonder whether the advent of war, bursting so violently upon its remote hiding-place, has sent the species into final extinction. Before 1942, under the protection of the Fish and Wildlife Service, the sea-otter was gradually on the increase. Perhaps when the shooting is over, when the menace of the Jap poacher has been removed forever, this rarest and most beautiful of our native animals will fight its way back once more from the verge of oblivion.

## 7. *They Came to Attu*

I wonder what's happened to Mike. I haven't seen Mike for a couple of years, since the time he took me fishing; but I thought of him when I heard the Japs had landed on Attu. You see, Mike Hudakof was chief of the little Aleut village of Attu: a short swart eager native, somewhere in his early forties, I should judge; a combination mayor and doctor and radio-operator and priest; wriggling with excitement, voluble, jabbering constantly about the Japs that day as he led me across the island to his favorite fishing stream. "Some day they come to Attu." I remember how his lips would pull back in a snarl of fright when he spoke of the Japs; evidently he lived in mortal terror of them. "They come here; you see. They take Attu some day."

He chattered incessantly over his shoulder as he climbed ahead of me up the steep barren slopes of the island, scampering like a monkey over the hummocks and the moss-grown volcanic boulders. Attu is treeless like all the Aleutians, covered with a thick spongy carpet of tundra, and studded with miniature wild flowers and cranberries and willows; my wading-boots sucked and tugged in the boggy moss, and progress was slow.

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But Mike had assured me there was good fishing here; and it seemed exciting to catch an American trout only seven hundred miles from Japan. It seemed even more exciting than Mike's fantastic stories about the Japs. "They know all about these islands. They come here last year. They plant a cross."

"What kind of a cross, Mike?" I smiled, as I halted beside a deep pool, and rigged my rod and tied on a Number Twelve Light Cahill.

"They come in a warship and they land and plant a big white cross on the hill."

I had a strike, but I retrieved the fly too fast. I cast again, and watched the fly float down the clear water towards me. I said absently: "Tell me about it, Mike."

Something struck the fly again, and this time I was into a fourteen-inch Dolly Varden, which so far as I know is the westernmost trout ever taken in America on a dry fly. I busied myself bringing it to the net while Mike chattered on. The warship had anchored in the harbor of Attu, he said, and a party of Jap naval officers had come ashore and asked for the chief of the village. Mike had been badly frightened; but the Japs were very friendly. All they wanted, they assured him, was to erect a cross at a spot where a Japanese prince had died. That seemed a laudible enough sentiment, and Mike gave his assent. It did strike him as odd that the Japs knew exactly where the prince was buried.

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They climbed the hill to the highest point—right above the town, he said—and they planted a white cross there; and then they came down again and thanked Mike and went back to their ship. They didn't sail right off, though. They stayed in the harbor all day, and some men came out on deck, and they made a lot of measurements with little brass instruments. When they finally sailed away, Mike said, he climbed the hill with a shovel and dug all around the cross, but there was no sign of any prince at all. So he took down the cross, and later he turned it over to the authorities. . . .

I didn't pay much attention to Mike at the time; because wild rumors and legends were as thick in the islands as the fog itself, in those innocent days before the war. Mike's stories sounded like the sheerest imagination to me then. I laughed at his tales of Japanese poachers, for example, who raided the priceless sea-otter herds each winter when the Coast Guard was away. To be sure, the sea-otters were not increasing as fast as they should; but it seemed too implausible that the Japs would actually dare. . . . I laughed when he told of the curious signs he would find now and then in the sand of an isolated beach; a deep triangular gouge that could only be made by the keel of a heavy dory, a broken china tea-cup, an occasional patch of gray paint scraped off on the rocks underwater. I laughed at his fables of submarines that native trappers had seen



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prowling off Kiska and Buldir and Agattu; obviously that was invention and nothing else. Mike was just making up stories to entertain me while I was fishing. "Japs come to our village two-three years ago, rape the old women. Women too old to have kids, but they have them for the Japs . . ." So I went on catching Dolly Varden trout on Attu that afternoon, and I smiled indulgently while Mike babbled on and on.

There was the story of the famous good-will flight from Japan, for instance. You may remember that flight, way back in the thirties: as a gesture of friendship and international amity, a plane was to fly from Tokyo to Washington, bringing greetings from the Mikado to our own Chief of State. Everybody thought it was a highly worthy cause; and when Tokyo politely asked permission to station a few observers on the Aleutian Islands, just to wave the plane along on its way, Washington gave immediate assent. So a Japanese warship dropped off the observers in little groups of three, at various strategic points along the Aleutians, and left them with a rowboat and some fishing-tackle. Mike said it was a most unusual kind of fishing-tackle: nothing but a long string with a piece of lead on the end. . . .

It was about that time that the plane in Tokyo began to have the most puzzling kind of trouble getting started on its flight. Tokyo was terribly embarrassed; something

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was wrong with the motors, please, the trip would have to be postponed another week or two, so sorry, Washington would please understand. Again and again that summer the trip was unaccountably delayed; until at last Tokyo sent apologetic word that in view of the late season it would no longer be feasible to make the attempt. They were so sorry, they said, so very very sorry, and Washington said forget it, it was perfectly all right, and a couple of ambassadors were photographed shaking hands, and the following week the Japanese warship went back to the Aleutians and picked up all the little groups of observers and brought them home again. And that was all.

Or almost all. The following year the cutter *Northland* was negotiating one of the narrow passes in the Aleutians, using the best available Coast Guard charts, swinging the lead and sounding her whistle to test the echo bouncing against the fog-bound cliffs, and making at best about four knots an hour. Behind her she heard a polite toot: "Excuse, please" and a Jap cruiser edged past her, doing some twenty knots, and slipped swiftly out of sight into the fog. . . .

Oh, it is easy to look back now and see the pattern very sharp and clear; but in those gullible days before the war, rumors of Oriental intrigue were so common in Alaska, and were repeated so loudly in all the road-

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houses and bars and cocktail lounges, that no one bothered to think they might be true. You heard over and over the story of the Japanese laundryman at Sitka—sometimes it was at Seward, sometimes at Dutch Harbor—who died and was buried, invariably to everyone's astonishment, in the full uniform of a Commander in the Japanese Navy. You heard the recurrent one of the Japanese house-servant, usually working around a Naval base to make it more sinister, who was greeted with low salaams by a visiting Admiral from a Japanese destroyer, and who acknowledged the Admiral's salute quite curtly. You heard about Japanese tourists with cameras, and Japanese fishermen with spyglasses, and Japanese cannery-workers with hidden radios that sent out garbled messages over the ether every night.

But those were the days of international amity and good will; and Washington frowned on anything that might offend our little buck-toothed brothers across the Pacific. They ignored the repeated complaints that Jap poachers were making a business of gathering the giant King crabs along the Aleutians, carrying them back to Japan, packing and labeling them, and reselling them to us in the San Francisco market at a price lower than any American canned crab on the shelves. They turned a deaf ear to the protests of Bristol Bay salmon-fishermen that Jap floating-tenders with fleets of trawlers were anchored off our most valuable fishing-grounds,

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netting our salmon; and when the outraged fishermen took the law into their own hands and ran off the Japs with shotguns, Washington offered profuse apologies to the Japanese government. We were so anxious, so very anxious, not to risk any unpleasantness in the Pacific.

A final interesting detail. Frank Dufresne, Alaska's famed Game Commissioner, happened to be in Dutch Harbor in 1931, the summer of that Good Will flight from Tokyo. He was staying at the Pedler home, the only roadhouse in Dutch Harbor; and his fellow-guest for a week was Mr. H. Kimura, who headed the Japanese Good Will Expedition. One night, after dinner, Mr. Kimura grew a little expansive over the brandy. "We are finding out such very interesting things about your islands. The edible foods; your sea-urchin, for example. Our men wade in the water with the natives, and they show us how to find these sea-eggs and how to dig out their sweet flesh." A sip of brandy. "Of course, we are already familiar with many of your common plants and roots, and certain species of kelp and seaweed that you ignore are considered great delicacies in Japan. The black lily, sometimes called Indian rice; do you know it? The root is as big as a small fist, made of many small rice-like grains, starchy but delicious."

"I suppose your people could exist pretty well here in the islands," Dufresne suggested very casually.

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Mr. Kimura set down his brandy, and a curious far-off look came into his eyes. "Five million Japanese," he said slowly, "could live in the Aleutians someday. . . ."

I wonder what Mike is doing now.

## 8. *We Even Had a Tree . . .*

We even had a tree. It wasn't much of a tree; but it looked pretty good to us, here in these barren and treeless islands. It made things seem a little more like home. . . .

You think a lot about home, when you are fighting on a lonely battlefield half a world away. Odd irrelevant thoughts: a certain easy chair, a worn place in the hall carpet, the way the sun would shine on the ferns in the dining-room bay-window. I remember standing with a pilot on the flying-line, waiting to start out on a flight over the enemy target, and he said to me suddenly: "You know, I bet my toothbrush is still hanging in the same place beside the wash-basin." Thoughts like that are more real sometimes than Japs, or bombs, or even the silence and loneliness and cold.

I remember another evening, sitting in a quonset-hut, with a sixty-mile gale blowing outside and the sleet rattling against the sheet-metal roof. We were scheduled to run a mission over Kiska tomorrow, if the weather broke, and the pilot beside me was to fly the lead-ship; but that wasn't what he was thinking about that night. What we talked about, on the eve of the raid, was his mother's fried chicken. He

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said his mother was without doubt the best fried-chicken cook in the State of Illinois. He said I'd never tasted fried chicken until I tasted hers. He said that when he got home, I'd have to come out and visit him in Benton and have some fried chicken. He even took a notebook out of his pocket and wrote down a list of the things she'd cook for us when I visited him. There'd be fried chicken, of course—he wrote that at the top of the list—and mashed potatoes and gravy, and biscuits, and for dessert there'd be peppermint-stick-candy ice cream. The wind was dying down, it would be morning soon, already the bombs were being loaded in the planes down on the line; but we sat on the edge of his cot and he talked about his mother's peppermint-stick-candy ice cream, how he'd turn the freezer for her and she'd let him lick the plunger later. Or else her pecan-pie. He wrote down pecan-pie on his list, while the first gray streaks of dawn showed in the eastern sky and the deep baritone drone of the warming motors began to fill the air. There wasn't any pecan-pie in the world that could touch her pecan-pie, he said. The first thing he did when he got home, he was going to have her make a pecan-pie. . . .

People ask sometimes: "What's their morale like, up there?" I don't know what morale means, any more than anybody else knows; but if it means doing a job when you're wet and lonely and cold—if it means com-

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plaining about the lack of any leave and crabbing about the mail and bitching long and loud about the food, and still going out and doing a job—if it means returning from a raid in the morning and begging your squadron-commander to go back and try it again that same afternoon—then their morale is all right. It isn't the morale of our fighters we have to worry about. It's the morale of the rest of us back home.

They do a lot of thinking about home, lying around their quonsets of an afternoon when the mission is called off: doing sack-time. Sack-time is the hours a pilot spends in his sleeping-bag. "I logged three more hours' sack-time this afternoon." They stretch out on their cots and talk, or listen to the radio, or play cards, or smoke; mostly they think. They think about strikes at home, and slowdowns; and workers in our defense-plants who take off a couple of days in the middle of the week to go fishing—there's no absenteeism on a battlefield—and labor-leaders who threaten walkouts to get higher pay, and factory-owners who chisel the government to get higher profits. They don't know whether labor or capital is right; they don't try to fix the blame; all they know is that no private war can be as important as the war they're fighting. I have seen their faces when they heard over the radio of another shut-down in a factory or a mine; I'd hate to be one of those who were responsible, and have to face these men



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after the war is over. I'd hate to be John L. Lewis, and have to look into the eyes of these men when they get home after the war.

They think about other things, lying around their quonsets day after day, waiting out the weather: selfishness and slackness and waste of time at home that means a delay in getting vital materials up here. They think of one of their squadron-mates who was forced to fly an old dog of a plane so wing-heavy it went into a spin and crashed at the end of the runway: no other ships on hand. They think of a bomber that was lost because its gun-turret failed to operate at the crucial moment against a swarm of attacking Zeros; the electric solenoid had burned out and replacement parts had not arrived in time. When you see a bomber go down in flames over Kiska Harbor—when you see a kid with his face blown full of shrapnel—when you see a shaving-brush and a girl's picture and some cigarettes gathering dust on a shelf beside a cot that won't be slept in again; then things like time-and-a-half for overtime, or gas-rationing, or a second pat of butter seem unimportant, somehow. Perhaps they would seem less important to our defense workers or labor-leaders or selfish farm-bloc Senators or business-as-usual businessmen or politics-as-usual politicians, if they could eat and sleep and live with these fliers in the Aleutians, and feel the dampness and loneliness and miserable cold, and

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look forward to a bombing-mission over the target as a welcome relief from the waiting and waiting. . . .

Oh, yes. About our tree. We had it on Christmas Eve. The men went out behind the camp that afternoon and gathered armloads of the green tundra-moss, and they fastened it together with baling-wire in the shape of a miniature fir. They sprinkled shavings from a bar of soap for artificial snow; and for Christmas tree decorations they hung some empty 50-caliber shells they found on the floor of a bomber that had just returned from a mission over Kiska. They made cornucopias out of the red-paper backs of film packs, and filled them with compressed chocolate and sea-biscuit from an emergency ratio-kit, and someone produced a really magnificent bell by cutting up a red-and-green tobacco tin and hanging a 30-caliber slug inside it for a clapper. They even fashioned a Star of Bethlehem for the top of the tree, by folding a red cellophane gas-mask cover. An enlisted man from Carolina, a ground-crew mechanic, balanced precariously on the back of a chair in his thick-soled leather boots and fitted the star in place. " 'Twas the night before Kiska," he murmured thoughtfully.

The long narrow mess-hut was crowded; the men sat on the tables and along the benches and on the floor with their shoulders propped against the muddy knees of the row behind them; shaggy, unshaven, their rain-

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soaked parkas dripping, their soggy boots leaking little pools of black water onto the rough boards. Most of them were youngsters from the South; some of them were seeing their first snow. The blonde nervous Chaplain was trying to be a cheerful M.C. and he kept winking his glasses and urging every one to sing the Christmas carols he had typed. "All right, fellows, 'Hark, the Herald Angels Sing' and let's all hear it." They draped their arms around each other's bulky shoulders, and sang in the deep drawl of Texas and the twang of New England and the slow slack syllables of Alabama. " 'Oh, Little Town of Bethlehem,' what do you say, now, fellows?" A couple of officers at the back of the hall joined in softly; a husky mess-cook, stripped to the waist, wiped dough from his forearms and strolled over towards the group. Then the Chaplain held up his hand, and explained about the presents. He was sorry, fellows, but there just weren't any presents. There hadn't been any mail, you see, and so there were no packages to put under the tree, no gifts from home, no candy, no cigars; but—his glasses winked—they'd managed to dig up a few little things at the PX, only of course there weren't enough to go round, so each man had been given a number, and now the Chaplain was going to draw some numbers out of a hat, and if anybody had a lucky number. . . . "Bingo," someone concluded, "merry Christmas."

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It didn't take long; there weren't many numbers. 27 was a box of matches; the winner walked back sheepishly through a gauntlet of envious eyes. 145 was a bar of chocolate; his tent-mates fell on it and devoured it on the spot. 13 opened his present and displayed it glumly. "No woman for a thousand miles," he muttered, "so what do I get? An address book!"

I remember one tow-headed kid from Tennessee, in oversize dungarees and heavy G.I. shoes, sitting alone at a table at the far end of the hall. He had a letter from his mother. He'd received it on October 14, and he'd reread it so many times it had finally come apart at the folds. He was rearranging the pieces on top of the table, so he could read it again on Christmas eve. He was only nineteen, you see, and he'd never been away from home before. . . .

We didn't have any turkey or plum-pudding on Christmas; no boats, you see. Our menu that day consisted of bean-soup; luke-warm stewed tomatoes; boiled potatoes which had been frozen and which we didn't eat; bread without any butter; and Vienna sausage. But I was eating with our Air Force combat-crews, I was sitting elbow-to-elbow with these men in leather flying-suits who are fighting our unknown war; and it was the finest Christmas dinner I ever had in my life.

## 9. *A Postscript*

I ran into Joe Broler on the street yesterday, and right away I thought of Wally Marvin. That seems funny, because there's really nothing in common between them at all. In fact, you couldn't find two people with less in common. They never met each other, they never even saw each other; but all the time I was talking to Joe I kept thinking of Wally, and I kept hearing Wally's voice.

Even now, I'm not sure which one of them this story is about. Maybe it's two different stories. Joe Broler is a defense-worker in Bridgeport today, making airplane parts; and the last time I saw Wally he was flying a medium bomber in the Aleutians, halfway around the globe from Joe. He was flying the kind of bomber that Joe is making parts for; but that doesn't mean they ever heard of each other, naturally. Joe's maybe twenty-seven, twenty-eight; Wally was only twenty-four when I knew him, though actually he looked older than Joe. You get old in a hurry, flying in Alaska. Joe of course is just the opposite type, big and slow and easy-going, without a nerve in his body; he was working in a garage in Bridgeport before he got this job in the airplane plant, and he has a wife Rose and a son Joe Junior,

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three years old, on whom he thinks the sun rises and sets. He used to carry a picture of Joe Junior around in his pocket all the time, and whenever I'd stop at the garage he'd take it out and hold it gingerly in his greasy fingers. "He's quite a kid, a'ready he can lick his old man, last night he gimme a punch in the stummick it like to knock me cold. He's gonna be a boxer when he grows up."

I saw Joe yesterday, just after I got back from the Aleutians. I was walking to the station, and he stopped and gave me a lift in his car. He had a big car, with brand new tires, and he was smoking a big cigar, and his wife and son were all dressed up and sitting in the front seat beside him. I was a little surprised to see him driving around in the middle of the morning. "Aren't you working today, Joe?"

"It's the kid's birthday," he said. "I'm driving him up to the country to his grammother's, it's his birthday."

The kid was just three years old today, Joe said; he told me all about the kid, but somehow while he was talking, I kept thinking of Wally, and I could hear Wally talking to his own son: "Well, son, you're growing up pretty fast, you'll be a man before your mother, so I thought on your birthday today we ought to have this little talk together. . . ."

I was glad to see Joe was doing so well. He had a good job at the airplane plant, he told me, he was aver-

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aging ninety bucks a week, that was better than thirty bucks he was making before the war. This way he was helping win the war, he said, and he wouldn't get drafted, and he could earn a good living and buy clothes and things for the kid. He let out a cloud of cigar smoke contentedly, and Rose said: "Roll that window down, Joe, you want the kid should get carsick?"

"He's all right," Joe grinned, rolling down the window. "Maybe he'd like a cigar himself. Here, kid, have a cigar?"

You could see his son meant a lot to Joe. That was why he was taking the day off, he explained to me, so he could be with the kid. He never got a chance to be with the kid, just Saturdays and Sundays. Nights by the time he got home from the factory the kid was going to bed. Now the kid was three years old, he didn't want the kid to grow up and not even know his old man. Besides, he could afford to take the day off; he was making plenty of money. I asked: "Won't they say anything, your not coming in today?"

"What can they say?" he shrugged. "Everybody else takes a couple of days off now and then, to sober up or else go to a ball game or something, I guess I got a right to be taking a day off to be with my own kid on his birthday. One day don't make any difference." He reached in his pocket, and handed the kid a piece of candy. "He's quite a kid for three, don't you think?"

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"Don't give him any more," Rose said, "he on'y throws it on the floor."

"He's gonna be a baseball player when he grows up," Joe nodded. "He's got a great pitching arm. Hey, kid, you gonna grow up and be Joe DiMag someday? . . ."

I got out at the station, and stood there and watched him drive away, and all the time I was hearing Wally's voice, the way I heard it in Anchorage a month ago, talking to his own son: ". . . and you'll grow up, son, and maybe you'll have a son of your own, and I hope he means as much to you as my son means to me. And I hope when you grow up there won't be a war, and you can be with your son, instead of way off here in Alaska somewhere. I've never seen you, son. You were born after I came up here. But I hope I'll get home someday. . . ." There was a long silence, and we could hear the steady scratching of the needle, and then Wally's voice said very quickly "Be a good boy, son, take care of mama" just as the record ended.

The man in the phonograph store in Anchorage asked us what to do with the record. Wally had come in and made the record just before he left for the Aleutians, and the man wanted to know what he should do with it, now that Wally wasn't coming back. We never found out what happened to Wally. His plane crashed against a mountain in the fog; that was all. He was a good pilot, but he was flying an old plane that should have been



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sent back and overhauled long ago. There weren't enough replacement planes, you see. Production back home in the factory had been a little slow. . . .

We paid the man in the store in Anchorage, and we mailed the record home to Wally's son. We thought that was what he would have wanted. That was one thing Wally had in common with Joe Broler: his son meant a lot to him, too.













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